


FANTASY

Tales



CLIVE BARKER
NEIL GAIMAN
THOMAS LIGOTTI
WILLIAM F. NOLAN
RONALD CHETWYND-HAYES
KIM NEWMAN
and others

Edited by STEPHEN JONES
& DAVID SUTTON

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About the Editors

Stephen Jones was born in 1953 and is the winner of the World Fantasy Award, the Horror Writers of America Bram Stoker Award and eight-time recipient of the British Fantasy Award. A full-time columnist, television producer/director and horror movie publicist (*Hellraiser*, *Hellbound*, *Nightbreed* etc.), he is the co-editor of *Horror: 100 Best Books*, *The Best Horror from Fantasy Tales*, *Gaslight & Ghosts*, *Now We Are Sick*, the *Best New Horror*, *Fantasy Tales* and *Dark Voices* series, and compiler of *Clive Barker's The Nightbreed Chronicles*, *The Mammoth Book of Terror*, *Clive Barker's Shadows in Eden* and *James Herbert: By Horror Haunted*.

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CONTENTS

THE CAULDRON	The Editors	1
<i>Views of the fantasy field</i>		
FT FORUM: SPEAKING FROM THE DARK	Clive Barker	3
<i>Genre makes a most reliable noose</i>		
FOREIGN PARTS	Neil Gaiman	9
<i>It's amazing what you can pick up without knowing it</i>		
THE MONSTER	R. Chetwynd-Hayes	29
<i>She was different and so she had to die</i>		
HOW JAQUEREL MADE WAR IN BELAZHURRA	Janet Fox	45
<i>A swordswoman and thief is possessed by the gods</i>		
THE REVENANT	Shawn Ramsey	75
<i>Verse</i>		
MOTHER HEN	Kim Newman	77
<i>For Sally Rhodes it was The Maltese Chicken!</i>		
THE SPECTACLES IN THE DRAWER	Thomas Ligotti	93
<i>They revealed what lies beyond our reality</i>		

HAPPY HOUR.....	Marvin Kaye	111
<i>For a time he could be anyone he wished</i>		
THE OLD LAUGHING LADY	Michael D. Toman	127
<i>When she laughed, death followed</i>		
DAY OF THE DARK MEN.....	Mike Chinn	151
<i>Swords and sorcery battle in a subterranean city</i>		
THE SORCERER TO HIS LONG-LOST LOVE.....	Darrell Schweitzer	174
<i>Verse</i>		
GOBBLE, GOBBLE!.....	William F. Nolan	175
<i>It was a fast food fiend that fed on humans</i>		

THE CAULDRON

Horror, fantasy, dark fantasy, high fantasy, science fantasy, science fiction, cyberpunk, steampunk, splatterpunk . . . In recent years genre fiction has been separated, sub-divided, and then downright *ghettoized* by publishers, editors and the writers themselves in an attempt to break away from what many see as the restrictions of current publishing categories or else to distance themselves from other practitioners working in the same field.

Over the past couple of years we have seen a number of major anthologies produced that have restricted the types of submissions to either "invitation only" (i.e only interested in "Big Names") or a specific gender (the glut of women-only horror anthologies). There is no doubt in our minds that this type of fractionating could dangerously dissolve the already precarious critical standing imaginative fiction holds in the wider field of literary endeavour.

One of the great strengths of "our" genre is its unity: taken together, science fiction, fantasy and horror make up a large percentage of the total number of books sold every year. Amongst our ranks we can number such well-known authors as Stephen King, James Herbert, Isaac Asimov, Anne McCaffrey, Piers Anthony, Dean R. Koontz, Anne Rice, Terry Pratchett and many others who, collectively, make the field of fantastic fiction a substantial force to be reckoned with in both terms of quality and success.

But as soon as we start departmentalizing these and other writers, when we call what they do "saga fiction" or "thriller fiction" or "splatterpunk" or whatever, then we begin to

lose that strength of unity and with it our distinctive voice in the marketplace.

Of course, this is nothing new. Over the years many of our finest fantasists have been spirited away by the so-called "mainstream" because their contributions to literature have been deemed too important to be labelled simply "fantasy". In this issue's "FT Forum", writer/film-maker/artist Clive Barker argues persuasively that it is about time we reclaimed some of these writers and their works for the *fantastique*. It is an argument we wholeheartedly support.

We have never purposely limited the contents of *Fantasy Tales*. Since we began publishing as a small press magazine in 1977, the title has been an open market for both newcomers and established names. This has not always had positive results, however, and we have quite a large backlog of accepted material still waiting to be published. Therefore our criteria for accepting manuscripts have grown stricter in recent years and we'd like to take this opportunity to thank all those writers who have been waiting to see their work published in these pages for their patience—with our expanded format and regular publishing schedule it shouldn't be too long until we get around to your story.

In the meantime, this latest volume of *Fantasy Tales* once again offers a fine selection of all types of imaginative fiction, with horror represented by Neil Gaiman, Kim Newman, Thomas Ligotti, Michael D. Toman and Phillip C. Heath, sword & sorcery in the shape of tales from Janet Fox and Mike Chinn, and even some offbeat science fiction courtesy of R. Chetwynd-Hayes, Marvin Kaye and William F. Nolan.

But then again, let's forget about categories. However you want to describe these stories, we hope you'll find them entertaining and perhaps thoughtful examples of the *fantastique* at its best. And, after all, isn't *that* what matters?

The Editors

Clive Barker

FT FORUM:
SPEAKING FROM
THE DARK

Clive Barker made his impressive debut as a horror writer in 1984 with six volumes of short stories, collectively titled Clive Barker's Books of Blood. Since then he has written such bestselling novels as The Damnation Game, Weaveworld, Cabal, The Great and Secret Show and has directed the cult movie hits Hellraiser and Nightbreed. Upcoming projects include a new novel, Imajica, and two new films: a remake of The Mummy and an epic science fiction adventure, both for Universal Pictures. Clive has been a regular contributor to Fantasy Tales over the years, and here he shares with us some of his favourite books of the fantastique . . .

Genre makes a most reliable noose; a man could strangle himself a dozen times attempting to separate the threads of one fictional form from another. It's true that both publishers and booksellers make the process seem easy,

dividing Romances from Thrillers from Science Fiction from Horror Fiction, as though these definitions were self-evident. To slicken the process still further, many authors actively strive to produce work that merely echoes previous pieces (their own, or other people's) thus offering little challenge to the generic status quo. The most interesting work, in any genre, however, is surely going on at the perimeters, where definitions blur. This is nowhere more evident than in the group of books collectively stamped horror. Here there are brilliantly constructed thrillers (try Thomas Harris's *Silence of the Lambs*); there are baroque romances (Anne Rice has put the blood back into bodice ripping); there are subtle, psychological pieces (our own Ramsey Campbell has long been a master of that particular form). All the above could be categorized as horror fiction, but in approach, purpose and style they are utterly different from one another.

Asked to define my own place in this parade of dark fictions I'd ask to be filed where some dyslexic clerk might slip me, somewhere between Baum and Burroughs (William, not Edgar Rice); by which I mean that the kind of fiction I write is often a fiction of invented worlds (even when it's set on earth; or perhaps *especially* then): the traveller's tale as written by a man just back from Hell by way of Oz and 42nd Street.

The first such stories I read, inevitably, were fairy tales. I had several volumes as a kid, and found in their darkest corners images and ideas I never tired of examining. Back and back I'd go to keep company with cannibal witches and lunatic queens, dragons and phantoms and malignant spirits, passing over the simperly stuff (kissing and orphans; orphans and kissing) to get to the business of the Wild Wood.

I was by no means alone in my fascination with the chilling stuff; most children show a healthy appetite for the monstrous. It's only later we're shamed and bullied into suppressing that appetite, so that for many readers horror



Transformations and miracles ... What more could I ask for? (Art: Clive Barker)

fiction is still a guilty pleasure.

One of the greatest purveyors of said pleasure is Ray Bradbury, and his short fiction, mingling horrors and wonderments in equal measure, were a major discovery in my early teens. With hindsight some of the passages I adored to read aloud to myself seem overwrought, but Bradbury is indisputably a master. Whether set in Illinois or Mexico, or on Mars, his work has the courage of poetry, which is so often missing in contemporary dark fantasy. Without it, this kind of storytelling can so easily become a heartless catalogue of atrocities, or simply ludicrous. The author of the *fantastique* has not only to present the remarkable, but *evoke* it, get inside its impossible skin.

Third up on this list of greats comes a play: Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*. My interest in theatre was fuelled by annual pantomime visits, but then nearly quenched when I discovered most contemporary theatre to be seen in my native city did not much believe in transformations and miracles. But Faustus, ah Faustus! Poetry, perversity, farce and damnation! What more could I ask for? I adored its rapid changes of tone, its sheer theatricality. Later, when I turned to the subject of infernal bargains myself, in a book called *The Damnation Game*, it was not Goethe's thesis-as-theatre which inspired me but Marlowe's fever-dream.

Marlowe's work is familiar to a large audience. Not so that of Arthur Machen, who described himself, late in life, as a man who'd "received as his reward insult, cruelty, beggary." He is still undervalued. Writers with a vision as desolate as his (Poe, for example) are widely read, taught and analyzed; others whose style cannot touch Machen's (for instance H.P. Lovecraft) are regularly reissued and reprinted. But Machen, though he has a small, devoted following, languishes. Only *The Bowmen*, published in 1914 in the *Evening News*, may be familiar; a story of supernatural

intervention during the Battle of Mons, which became folklore. It's a fine story, but just the tip of Machen's talent.

The co-existence of so-called reality with sacred and supernatural forces much preoccupied another and far more ambitious myth-maker: William Blake. He had more on his mind than writing a chilling page-turner, but then so, I suspect, do a lot of explorers of the *fantastique*. The agendas may be kept secret, but on those lists I think you'd find such heavyweights as the problem of Belief, the nature of Evil, and the possibility of the Miraculous in a stubbornly rational world. Blake, of course, had no trouble believing in miracles. He saw angels on Peckham Rye. The imagination was, he repeatedly argued, the source of all comprehension: without it, everything fell prey to the reductionists. Paradoxically his work has been taken to the bosom of the very critics and academics who presently scorn with indifference the work of most writers of imaginative fiction, unless it's in translation. To be a magic realist is worthy of review space, while to write books packaged as science fiction, horror or fantasy is by and large not. I hereby claim William back (though I'd rather there was no need for the struggle; rather the *fantastique* was allowed its celebrants in the pages of the influential journals just as Le Carre's work now is, or Chandler's). I claim him as a star in a particular heaven, which seems to have hung over the British Isles for centuries. So many of the seminal works of fantastic literature—books by Shelley, Stevenson, Stoker, Tolkien, Lewis, Peake, Barrie, Aldiss, Ballard, Wells, and so on—were created in these Isles; a rich tradition which is worthy of more attention than it gets.

Speaking of profusion—and a lot of these choices seem to be *inclusionist* rather than *ex*—may I recommend a collection, edited by Kirby McCauley, called *Dark Forces*, which gathers stories by talents as diverse as Isaac Singer, Stephen King and Joyce Carol Oates, allowing each author space to speak

from their dreams. The result is a book in which every story is unlike the one preceding; perfect proof that a genre which is so often perceived as limiting is, in truth, a continent for the roaming.

Finally, to one of the greatest of all source books. The one with the most horrors and miracles, the cruellest ironies, the most hideous revenges. I've always been pleased that hotels chose a book of the *fantastique* for those nights when the TV was dull. Moralists come and go; but stories keep coming back. I never tire of finding in the ancient versions rumours of tales to come. The fiction of our fears is at its best also a fiction of transformation and transcendence; seldom comforting, often paradoxical; by turns hallucinatory and chillingly detached; one moment an account of tribal origins; the next poetry and metaphysics. In the beginning was indeed the word. But only one genre takes such conspicuous account of the void from which that word was uttered.

Neil Gaiman

FOREIGN PARTS

Neil Gaiman has contributed reviews, interviews and articles to a wide variety of publications, including Time Out, The Good Book Guide, Foundation and Penthouse, amongst numerous others. His short fiction has seen a similarly diverse range of outlets, such as Knave, Tales from the Forbidden Planet 2, Words Without Pictures, Digital Dreams, Midnight Graffiti and Winter Chills. Neil is also co-editor of Ghastly Beyond Belief and Now We Are Sick and the author of The Official Hitch-Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy Companion. He was interested in writing for comics from an early age, and in recent years he has become an award-winning scriptwriter for such titles as 2000 AD, Revolver, DC Comics' Black Orchid, The Sandman and The Books of Magic, plus the graphic novel, Violent Cases. He is also the co-author (with Terry Pratchett) of the bestselling novel Good Omens. Neil first appeared in these pages in 1989 with a poem, but the grim, contemporary tale that follows marks the author's first fiction in FT.

The VENEREAL DISEASE is disease contracted as a consequence of impure connexion. The fearful constitutional consequences which may result from this affection,—consequences, the fear of which

may haunt the mind for years, which may taint the whole springs of health, and be transmitted to circulate in the young blood of innocent offspring,—are indeed terrible considerations, too terrible not to render the disease one of those which must unhesitatingly be placed under medical care.

Spencer Thomas M.D. L.R.C.S. (Edin.)

A Dictionary of Domestic Medicine and Household Surgery: 1882.

Simon Powers didn't like sex.

Not really.

He disliked having someone else in the same bed as himself; he suspected that he came too soon; he always felt uncomfortably that his performance was in some way being graded, like a driving test, or a practical examination.

He had got laid in college a few times, and once, three years ago, after the office New Year's party. But that had been that, and as far as Simon was concerned he was well out of it.

It occurred to him once, during a slack time at the office, that he would have liked to have lived in the days of Queen Victoria, where well brought up women were no more than resentful sex-dolls in the bedroom: they'd unlace their stays, loosen their petticoats (revealing pinkish white flesh) then lie back and suffer the indignities of the carnal act—an indignity it would never even occur to them that they were meant to enjoy.

He filed it away for later, another masturbatory fantasy.

Simon masturbated a great deal. Every night—sometimes more than that, if he was unable to sleep. He could take as long, or as short, a time to climax as he wished. And in his mind, he had had them all. Film and television stars; women from the office; schoolgirls; the naked models who pouted from the crumpled pages of *Fiesta*; faceless slaves in chains; tanned boys with bodies like Greek gods . . .

Night after night they paraded in front of him.

It was safer that way.

In his mind.

And afterward he'd fall asleep, comfortable and safe in a world he controlled, and he'd sleep without dreaming. Or at least, he never remembered his dreams in the morning.

The morning it started he was woken by the radio ("... two hundred killed and many others believed to be injured, and now over to Jack for the weather and traffic news . . ."), dragged himself out of bed, and stumbled, bladder aching, into the bathroom.

He pulled up the toilet seat, and urinated. It felt like he was pissing needles.

He needed to urinate again after breakfast—less painfully, since the flow was not as heavy—and three more times before lunch.

Each time it hurt.

He told himself that it couldn't be a venereal disease. That was something that other people got, and something (he thought of his last sexual encounter, three years in the past) that you got from other people. You couldn't really catch it from toilet seats, could you? Wasn't that just a joke?

Simon Powers was twenty-six, and he worked in a large London bank, in the securities division. He had few friends at work. His only real friend, Nick Lawrence, a lonely Canadian, had recently transferred to another branch, and Simon sat by himself in the staff canteen, staring out at the Docklands Lego landscape, picking at a limp green salad.

Someone tapped him on the shoulder.

"Simon, I heard a good one today. Wanna hear?" Jim Jones was the office clown, a dark-haired, intense young man, who claimed he had a special pocket on his boxer shorts, for condoms.

"Um. Sure."

"Here you go. What's the collective noun for people who work in banks?"

Foreign Parts

"The what?"

"Collective noun. You know, like a flock of sheep, a pride of lions. Give up?"

Simon nodded.

"A Wunch of Bankers.'

Simon must have looked puzzled, because Jim sighed and said, "Wunch of bankers. *Bunch* of *Wankers*. God you're slow . . ." then, spotting a group of young women at a far table, Jim straightened his tie, and carried his tray over to them.

He could hear Jim telling his joke to the women, this time with added hand movements.

They all got it immediately.

Simon left his salad on the table, and went back to work.

That night he sat in his chair, in his bedsitter flat, with the television turned off, and he tried to remember what he knew about venereal diseases.

There was syphilis, that pocked your face and drove the Kings of England mad; gonorrhoea—the Clap—a green oozing, and more madness; crabs, little pubic lice, which nested and itched (he inspected his pubic hairs through a magnifying glass, but nothing moved); AIDS, the eighties plague, a plea for clean needles and safer sexual habits (but what could be safer than a clean wank for one into a fresh handful of white tissues?); herpes, which had something to do with cold sores (he checked his lips in the mirror. They looked fine). That was all he knew.

And he went to bed, and fretted himself to sleep, without daring to masturbate.

That night he dreamed of tiny women with blank faces, walking in endless rows between gargantuan office blocks, like an army of soldier ants.

Simon did nothing about the pain for another two days. He hoped it would go away, or get better on its own. It

didn't. It got worse. The pain continued for up to an hour after urination; his penis felt raw and bruised inside.

And on the third day, he phoned his doctor's surgery to make an appointment. He had dreaded having to tell the woman who answered the phone what the problem was, and so he was relieved, and perhaps just a little disappointed, when she didn't ask, but simply made an appointment for the following day.

He told his senior at the bank that he had a sore throat, and would need to see the doctor about it. He could feel his cheeks burn as he told her, but she did not remark on this, merely told him that that would be fine.

When he left her office he found that he was shaking.

It was a grey, wet day when he arrived at the doctor's surgery. There was no queue, and he went straight in to the doctor. Not his regular doctor, Simon was comforted to see. This was a young Pakistani, of about Simon's age, who interrupted Simon's stammered recitation of symptoms to ask:

"Urinating more than usual, are we?"

Simon nodded.

"Any discharge?"

Simon shook his head.

"Right ho. I'd like you to take down your trousers, if you don't mind."

Simon took them down. The Doctor peered at his penis. "You *do* have a discharge, you know," he said.

Simon did himself up again.

"Now, Mr Powers, tell me, do you think it possible that you might have picked up from someone, a, uh, venereal disease?"

Simon shook his head vigorously. "I haven't had sex with anyone—" he had almost said 'anyone else', "—in almost three years."

Foreign Parts

"No?" The doctor obviously didn't believe him. He smelled of exotic spices, and had the whitest teeth Simon had ever seen. "Well, you have either contracted gonorrhoea or NSU. Probably NSU: Non Specific Urethritis. Which is less famous and less painful than gonorrhoea, but it can be a bit of an old bastard to treat. You can get rid of gonorrhoea with one big dose of antibiotics. Kills the bugger off . . ." He clapped his hands, twice. Loudly. "Just like that."

"You don't know, then?"

"Which one it is? Good Lord no. I'm not even going to try to find out. I'm sending you to a special clinic, which takes care of all of that kind of thing. I'll give you a note to take with you." He pulled a pad of headed notepaper from a drawer. "What is your profession, Mr Powers?"

"I work in a bank."

"A teller?"

"No." He shook his head. "I'm in securities. I clerk for two assistant managers." A thought occurred to him. "They don't have to know about this, do they?"

The Doctor looked shocked. "Good gracious no."

He wrote a note, in a careful, round handwriting, stating that Simon Powers, age 26, had something that was probably NSU. He had a discharge. Said he had had no sex for three years. In discomfort. Please could they let him know the results of the tests. He signed it with a squiggle. Then he handed Simon a card, with the address and phone number of the Special Clinic on it. "Here you are. This is where you go. Not to worry—happens to lots of people. See all the cards I have here? Not to worry—you'll soon be right as rain. Phone them when you get home and make an appointment."

Simon took the card, and stood up to go.

"Don't worry," said the Doctor. "It won't prove difficult to treat."

Simon nodded, and tried to smile.

He opened the door, to go out.

"And at any rate it's nothing really nasty, like syphilis," said the Doctor.

The two elderly women sitting outside in the hallway waiting area looked up delightedly at this fortuitous overheard, and stared hungrily at Simon as he walked away.

He wished he were dead.

On the pavement outside, waiting for the bus home, Simon thought: *I've* got a venereal disease. I've *got* a venereal disease. I've got a *venereal disease*. Over and over, like a mantra.

He should toll a bell as he walked.

On the bus he tried not to get too close to his fellow passengers. He was certain they knew (couldn't they read the plague-marks on his face?); and at the same time he was ashamed he was forced to keep it a secret from them.

He got back to the flat and went straight into the bathroom, expecting to see a decayed horror-movie face, a rotting skull fuzzy with blue mould, staring back at him from the mirror. Instead he saw a pink-cheeked bank clerk in his mid-twenties, fair-haired, perfect-skinned.

He fumbled out his penis and scrutinised it with care. It was neither a gangrenous green nor a leprous white, but looked perfectly normal, except for the slightly swollen tip and the clear discharge that lubricated the hole. He realised that his white underpants had been stained across the crotch by the leak.

Simon felt angry with himself, and angrier with God for having given him a (say it) (*dose of the clap*) obviously meant for someone else.

He masturbated that night, for the first time in four days.

He fantasised a schoolgirl, in blue cotton panties, who changed into a policewoman, then two policewomen, then three.

Foreign Parts

It didn't hurt at all, until he climaxed; then he felt as if someone were pushing a switchblade through the inside of his cock. As if he were ejaculating a pin-cushion.

He began to cry then, in the darkness, but whether from the pain, or from some other reason, less easy to identify, even Simon was unsure.

That was the last time he masturbated.

The clinic was located in a dour Victorian hospital in central London. A young man in a white coat looked at Simon's card, and took his Doctor's note, and told him to take a seat.

Simon sat down on an orange plastic chair, covered with brown cigarette burns.

He stared at the floor for a few minutes. Then, having exhausted that form of entertainment, he stared at the walls, and finally, having no other option, at the other people.

They were all male, thank god—women were on the next floor up—and there were more than a dozen of them:

The most comfortable were the macho building site types, here for their seventeenth or seventieth time, looking rather pleased with themselves, as if whatever they had caught was proof of their virility; there were a few city gents, in ties and suits. One of them looked relaxed; he carried a mobile telephone. Another, hiding behind a *Daily Telegraph*, was blushing, embarrassed to be there; there were little men with wispy moustaches and tatty raincoats—newspaper sellers, perhaps, or retired teachers; a rotund oriental gentleman, who chainsmoked filterless cigarettes, lighting each cigarette from the butt of the one before, so the flame never went out, but was transmitted from one dying cigarette to the next; in one corner sat a scared gay couple. Neither of them looked more than eighteen. This was obviously their first appointment as well, the way they kept glancing around.

They were holding hands, white-knuckled and discreetly. They were terrified.

Simon felt comforted. He felt less alone.

"Mister Powers, please," said the man at the desk. Simon stood up, conscious that all eyes were upon him, that he'd been identified and named in front of all these people. A cheerful, red-haired doctor in a white coat was waiting.

"Follow me," he said.

They walked down some corridors, through a door (on which *DR J. BENHAM* was written in felt pen on a white sheet of paper sellotaped to the frosted glass), into a doctor's office.

"I'm Doctor Benham," said the doctor. He didn't offer to shake hands. "You have a note from your doctor?"

"I gave it to the man at the desk."

"Oh." Dr Benham opened a file on the desk in front of him. There was computer-printout label on the side. It said:

REG'D 2 JULY 90 . MALE. 90/00666.L
POWERS, SIMON, MR.
BORN 12 OCT 63. SINGLE.

Benham read the note, looked at Simon's penis, and handed him a sheet of blue paper from the file. It had the same label, stuck to the top.

"Take a seat in the corridor," he told him. "A nurse will collect you."

Simon waited in the corridor.

"They're very fragile," said the sunburnt man sitting next to him, by accent a South African, or perhaps Zimbabwean. Colonial accent, at any rate.

"I'm sorry?"

"Very fragile. Venereal diseases. Think about it. You can catch a cold or flu simply by being in the same room as

Foreign Parts

someone who's got it. Venereal diseases need warmth and moisture, and intimate contact."

Not mine, thought Simon, but he didn't say anything.

"You know what I'm dreading?" said the South African.

Simon shook his head.

"Telling my wife," said the man, and he fell silent.

A nurse came and took Simon away. She was young, and pretty, and he followed her into a cubicle. She took the blue slip of paper from him.

"Take off your jacket and roll up your right sleeve."

"My jacket?"

She sighed. "For the blood test."

"Oh."

The blood test was almost pleasant, compared to what came next.

"Take down your trousers," she told him. She had a marked Australian accent. His penis had shrunk, tightly pulled in on itself; it looked grey and wrinkled. He found himself wanting to tell her that it was normally much larger, but then she picked up a metal instrument with a wire loop at the end, and he wished it were even smaller. "Squeeze your penis at the base, and push forward a few times." He did so. She stuck the loop into the head of his penis and twisted it around inside. He winced at the pain. She smeared the discharge onto a glass slide. Then she pointed to a glass jar on a shelf. "Can you urinate into that for me, please?"

"What, from here?"

She pursed her lips. Simon suspected that she had heard that joke thirty times a day since she had been working there.

She went out of the cubicle and left him alone to pee.

Simon found it difficult to pee at the best of times, often having to wait around in toilets until all the people had gone. He envied men who could casually walk into toilets, unzip, and

carry on cheerful conversations with their neighbours in the adjoining urinal, all the while showering the white porcelain with yellow urine. Often he couldn't do it at all.

He couldn't do it now.

The nurse came in again. "No luck? Not to worry. Take a seat back in the waiting room, and the doctor will call you in a minute."

"Well," said Dr Benham. "You have NSU. Non Specific Urethritis."

Simon nodded, and then he said, "What does that mean?"

"It means you don't have gonorrhoea, Mr Powers."

"But I haven't had sex with, with anyone, for . . ."

"Oh that's nothing to worry about. It can be a quite spontaneous disease—you need not, um, indulge, to pick it up."

Benham reached into a desk drawer and pulled out a bottle of pills. "Take one of these four times a day, before meals. Stay off alcohol, no sex, and don't drink milk for a couple of hours after taking one. Got it?"

Simon grinned nervously.

"I'll see you next week. Make an appointment downstairs."

Downstairs they gave him a red card with his name on and the time of his appointment. It also had a number on: 90/00666.L.

Walking home in the rain, Simon paused outside a travel agents'. The poster in the window showed a beach in the sun, and three bronzed women in bikinis, sipping long drinks.

Simon had never been abroad.

Foreign places made him nervous.

As the week went on the pain went away; and four days later Simon found himself able to urinate without flinching.

Something else was happening, however.

It began as a tiny seed, which took root in his mind, and grew. He told Dr Benham about it, on his next appointment.

Foreign Parts

Benham was puzzled.

"You're saying that you don't feel your penis is your own anymore, then, Mr Powers?"

"That's right, Doctor."

"I'm afraid I don't quite follow you. Is there some kind of loss of sensation?"

Simon could feel his penis inside his trousers, felt the sensation of cloth against flesh. In the darkness it began to stir.

"Not at all. I can feel everything like I always could. It's just it feels . . . well, different, I suppose. Like it isn't really part of me any more. Like it . . ." he paused, ". . . like it belongs to someone else."

Dr Benham shook his head. "To answer your question, Mr Powers, that isn't a symptom of NSU—although it's a perfectly valid psychological reaction for someone who has contracted it. A, uh, feeling of disgust with yourself, perhaps, which you've externalised as a rejection of your genitalia."

That sounds about right, thought Dr Benham. He hoped he had got the jargon correct. He had never paid much attention to his psychology lectures or textbooks, which might explain why he was currently serving out a stint in a London VD clinic.

Powers looked a little soothed.

"I was just a bit worried, doctor, that's all." He chewed his lower lip. "Um, what exactly is NSU?"

Benham smiled, reassuringly. "Could be any one of a number of things. NSU is just our way of saying we don't know exactly what it is. 'Non specific', you see. It's an infection, and it responds to antibiotics. Which reminds me . . ." He opened a desk drawer, and took out a new week's supply.

"Make an appointment downstairs for next week. No sex. No alcohol."

No sex? thought Simon. *Not bloody likely.*

But when he walked past the pretty Australian nurse, in the corridor, he felt his penis begin to stir again; begin to get warm, and to harden.

Benham saw Simon the following week. Tests showed he still had the disease.

Benham shrugged.

"It's not unusual for it to hang on for this long. You say you feel no discomfort?"

"No. None at all. And I haven't seen any discharge either."

Benham was tired, and a dull pain throbbed behind his left eye. He glanced down at the tests, in the folder. "You've still got it, I'm afraid."

Simon Powers shifted in his seat. He had large, watery blue eyes, and a pale, unhappy face. "What about the other thing, Doctor?"

The doctor shook his head. "What other thing?"

"I *told* you," said Simon. "Last week. I *told* you. The feeling that my, um, my penis, wasn't, isn't *my* penis any more."

Of course, thought Benham. It's *that* patient. There was never any way he could remember the procession of names and faces and penises, with their awkwardness, and their braggadocio, and their sweaty nervous smells, and their sad little diseases.

"Mm. What about it?"

"It's spreading, doctor. The whole lower half of my body feels like it's someone else's. My legs, and everything. I can *feel* them alright, and they go where I want them to go, but sometimes I get the feeling that if they wanted to go somewhere else—if they wanted to go walking off into the world—they could, and they'd take me with them.

"I wouldn't be able to do anything to stop it."



He felt as if he were ejaculating a pin-cushion. (Art: R. Rawling)

Benham shook his head. He hadn't really been listening. "We'll change your antibiotics. If the others haven't knocked this disease out by now, I'm sure these will. They'll probably get rid of this other feeling as well—it's probably just a side effect of the antibiotics."

The young man just stared at him.

Benham felt he should say something else. "Perhaps you should try to get out more," he said.

The young man stood up.

"Same time next week. No sex, no booze, no milk after the pills." The doctor recited his litany.

The young man walked away. Benham watched him carefully, but could see nothing strange about the way he walked.

On Saturday night, Dr Jeremy Benham, and his wife, Celia, attended a dinner party, held by a professional colleague. Benham sat next to psychiatrist.

They began to talk, over the hors d'oeuvres.

"The trouble with telling folks you're a psychiatrist," said the psychiatrist, who was American, and huge, and bullet-headed, and looked like a merchant marine, "is you get to watch them trying to act normal for the rest of the evening." He chuckled, low and dirty.

Benham chuckled too, and since he was sitting next to a psychiatrist, he spent the rest of the evening trying to act normally.

He drank too much wine with his dinner.

After the coffee, when he couldn't think of anything else to say, he told the psychiatrist (whose name was Marshall, although he told Benham to call him Mike) what he could recall of Simon Power's delusions.

Mike laughed. "Sounds fun. Maybe a tiny bit spooky. But nothing to worry about. Probably just a hallucination caused

by a reaction to the antibiotics. Sounds a little like Capgras's Syndrome. You heard about that over here?"

Benham nodded, then thought, then said, "No". He poured himself another glass of wine, ignoring his wife's pursed lips and almost imperceptibly shaken head.

"Well, Capgras's Syndrome . . ." said Mike, "is this funky delusion. Whole piece on it in the *Journal of American Psychiatry*, about five years back. Basically, it's where a person believes that the important people in his or her life—family members, workmates, parents, loved ones, whatever—have been replaced by—get this!—exact doubles.

"Doesn't apply to everyone they know. Just selected people. Often just one person in their life. No accompanying delusions, either. Just that one thing. Acutely emotionally disturbed people, with paranoid tendencies."

The psychiatrist picked his nose with his thumbnail. "I ran into a case myself, couple, two-three years back."

"Did you cure him?"

The psychiatrist gave Benham a sideways look, and grinned, showing all his teeth. "In psychiatry, doctor, unlike, perhaps, the world of sexually transmitted disease clinics, there is no such thing as a cure. There is only adjustment."

Benham sipped the red wine. Later it occurred to him that he would never have said what he said next, if it wasn't for the wine. Not aloud, anyway. "I don't suppose . . ." he paused, remembering a film he had seen as a teenager (something about *bodysnatchers*?), "I don't suppose that anyone ever checked to see if those people *had* been removed and replaced by exact doubles . . .?"

Mike—Marshall—whatever—gave Benham a very funny look indeed, and turned around in his chair to talk to his neighbour on the other side.

Benham for his part carried on trying to act normally (whatever that was) and failed miserably. He got very drunk

indeed, started muttering about 'fucking colonials', and had a blazing row with his wife after the party was over, none of which were particularly normal occurrences.

Benham's wife locked him out of their bedroom, after the argument.

He lay on the sofa downstairs, covered by a crumpled blanket, and masturbated into his underpants, his hot seed spurting across his stomach.

In the small hours he was woken by a cold sensation around his loins.

He wiped himself off with his dress shirt, and returned to sleep.

Simon was unable to masturbate.

He wanted to, but his hand wouldn't move. It lay beside him, healthy, fine; but it was as if he had forgotten how to make it respond. Which was silly, wasn't it?

Wasn't it?

He began to sweat. It dripped from his face and forehead onto the white cotton sheets: but the rest of his body was dry.

Cell by cell something was reaching up inside him. It brushed his face, tenderly, like the kiss of a lover; it was licking his throat, breathing on his cheek. Touching him.

He had to get out of the bed. He couldn't get out of the bed.

He tried to scream, but his mouth wouldn't open. His larynx refused to vibrate.

Simon could still see the ceiling, lit by the lights of passing cars. The ceiling blurred: his eyes were still his own, and tears were oozing out of them, hot down his face, soaking the pillow.

They don't know what I've got, he thought. *They said I had*

Foreign Parts

what everyone else gets. But I didn't catch that. I've caught something different.

Or maybe, he thought, as his vision clouded over, and the darkness swallowed the last of Simon Powers, *it caught me.*

Soon after that Simon got up, and washed, and inspected himself carefully in front of the bathroom mirror. Then he smiled, as if he liked what he saw.

Benham smiled. "I'm pleased to tell you," he said, "that I can give you a clean bill of health."

Simon Powers stretched in his seat, lazily, and nodded. "I feel terrific," he said.

He did look well, Benham thought. Glowing with health. He seemed taller as well. A very attractive young man, decided the doctor. "So, uh, no more of those feelings?"

"Feelings?"

"Those feelings you were telling me about. That your body didn't belong to you any more."

Simon waved a hand, gently, fanning his face. The cold weather had broken, and London was stewing in a sudden heatwave; it didn't feel like England any more.

Simon seemed amused.

"All of this body belongs to me, Doctor. I'm certain of that."

Simon Powers (90/00666.L SINGLE. MALE) grinned like the world belonged to him as well.

The doctor watched him as he walked out of the surgery. He looked stronger, now; less fragile.

The next patient on Jeremy Benham's appointment card was a twenty-two year old boy. Benham was going to have to tell him he was HIV positive. *I hate this job,* he thought. *I need a holiday.*

He walked down the corridor to call the boy in, and pushed past Simon Powers, talking animatedly to a pretty young

Australian Nurse. ". . . it must be a lovely place," he was telling her. "I want to see it. I want to go everywhere. I want to meet *everyone*." He was resting a hand on her arm, and she was making no move to free herself from it.

Dr Benham stopped beside them. He touched Simon on the shoulder. "Young man," he said. "Don't let me see you back here."

Simon Powers grinned. "You won't see me here again, Doctor," he said. "Not as such, anyway. I've packed in my job. I'm going around the world."

They shook hands. Powers' hand was warm, and comfortable and dry.

Benham walked away, but could not avoid hearing Simon Powers, still talking to the nurse.

"It's going to be so great," he was saying to her. Benham wondered if he was talking about sex, or world travel, or possibly, in some way, both.

"I'm going to have such *fun*," said Simon. "I'm loving it already."

R. Chetwynd-Hayes

THE MONSTER

Ronald Chetwynd-Hayes has been one of the UK's most industrious horror authors and, in 1988, to mark his services to the genre, he was presented with both The Horror Writers of America Bram Stoker Award and The British Fantasy Society Special Award. He has published numerous novels and short story collections (with titles like The House of Dracula and Tales from the Dark Lands), and has edited over thirty anthologies. These include twelve volumes of The Fontana Book of Great Ghost Stories, continuing a tradition begun by Robert Aickman, the series' first editor. Two movies have also been based on his work, From Beyond the Grave and The Monster Club. Ronald's short fiction has appeared widely, most recently in Skeleton Crew and The Mammoth Book of Terror, and his latest novel is The Curse of the Snake God. We welcome him to Fantasy Tales with this unusual science fiction story.

They were kind to her in their own, cold way, but she was young and would ask questions, and Aunt Mabs sighed heavily, knowing the truth must be unveiled sooner or later.

"Aunt, why can't I leave the house?"

"You aren't well, child. Don't keep bothering me."

"But I feel fine."

"Well, you aren't fine, so be quiet."

A little later.

"Aunt, I see children pass the house twice a day. Where are they going?"

"School."

"What's school?"

The woman shook her head in exasperation, then quickly left the room.

That evening Uncle Carl came to her room, the lines on his lean face set into a determined expression. He put her dinner tray down on the all-purpose table, then sat down on the edge of the bed and watched her eat.

"Caroline, you've been asking questions again."

She was frightened when he spoke this way—and for good reason; she paused and looked at his stern face with wide open, fear-glazed eyes, and the man shuddered.

"I only wanted to know."

"If you ask such questions again, I shall beat you. Be grateful that there are two people who are willing to feed and keep you in comfort. Give praise to Almighty Jehovah that He has in His great mercy, spared you the terror of His wrath. Seek not knowledge, revel in ignorance, for that is Jehovah's gift to sinful man."

"All praise to Jehovah," she muttered the conventional phrase. "I promise to sin no more."

"Tis well." He rose slowly, a man worn and tired by a lifetime of fear. "I do not wish to hear of questions again." He walked to the door, then looked back, his hand on the doorknob. "Do not make us regret what we have done."

"No, Uncle," she answered, grateful that he was leaving, her mind now a vast, trembling question.

Next day they moved her into a new room, well back from the street, and the window was veiled by a thick gauze curtain



The moon slid up from behind the hills; its face was grey, speckled with bright pimples of light . . . and it was vast. (Art: Dallas Goffin)

which was tacked to the window frame on all sides so she could not pull it aside. But Satan Atomo entered her heart and whispered that a small hole could be made in the centre; not large enough for the Aunt to detect, for she was somewhat shortsighted, but sufficient for one young eye to peep out—to see the small garden, and what lay beyond the far wall.

There was a house on the left, and a fairly large garden that ran obliquely to Uncle Carl's; complete with a dark green lawn and bordered by white flower beds. Caroline liked this view better than the old one, for the street was only a mud-churned track, with the crop fields on the other side, and the ever-smoking bad lands in the far distance. A range of tall hills shut off whatever lay beyond on this side, and the scene was restful, at the same time exciting, for one could hope for something new to come over the hills, and Caroline lived on hope.

She had been in the new room three days when the young man appeared in the far garden. He was not the first young man she had seen, for many had passed along the street, but he was the first she had been able to study for any length of time. He erected a garden chair, then seated himself and stretched out his long legs, clearly determined to absorb as much of the sunlight as he could before moon rising. He was, she decided, a most handsome young man, and there was an unaccountable quickening of her heart when he stripped off his tunic and bared his torso. A man minus his clothes was a phenomenon she had never considered; in fact any human being undressed had been, to that moment, an impossibility. Aunt Mabs always made her bath in the dark, maintaining it was sinful to see even one's own naked flesh, and Caroline jerked back from the window like a frightened bird, and took refuge on her bed.

It stood to reason that Jehovah must have noted this sinful act, and was without doubt preparing to bring down His wrath

The Monster

upon the not-to-be-thought-of young man, not to mention the equally evil girl who now trembled on her bed. She waited for the thunder clap, the bellow of divine rage, and was strangely disappointed when it did not come. The hours passed, then Aunt Mabs brought in her supper, glancing at the girl with her usual worried expression that deepened when she saw the white face and troubled eye.

"What have you been up to?"

Caroline knew she should confess and risk a beating, but logic suggested that if Almighty Jehovah had withheld His hand, it would be blasphemous for Uncle Carl to wield his belt. So she said:

"Nothing, Gracious Aunt, only I feel a little unwell."

The woman grunted and there was a glimmer of hope in her eyes.

"Then you must get to bed so soon as moonrising prayers are over. Pray for forgiveness, and thank Almighty Jehovah that he has spared you from his wrath."

As Caroline muttered "Amen", she wondered for one panic-stricken moment if Aunt Mabs knew, but on reflection decided she was only referring to the perpetual wrath that the Almighty only just restrained Himself from pouring down upon her own sinful person.

Aunt Mabs left the room to prepare herself for the nightly moonrising prayers, and Caroline quickly ate her yeast cutlet and nut roast, before moving fearfully towards the window, for it was necessary that everyone witness the moonrising so as to remember the sins of the forefathers.

The young man was still there, but now, thankfully, fully clothed, and with him were two older people, a man and woman, clearly his Uncle and Aunt. They were kneeling on small, dark red cushions, gazing intently at the distant hills, from behind which the moon would soon rise. Uncle Carl and Aunt Mabs came out into their small garden and knelt

on identical cushions, and Caroline knelt on her chair, her eye sinfully glued to the hole in her curtain.

The familiar rumble began, and the earth trembled; the three people in the far garden prostrated themselves, for this was Almighty Jehovah's voice, growling out his rage, bidding them all to remember—to remember; renewing His covenant made to man after the great sin, that He would punish and destroy, unless all tremble as the earth trembled, for He was a jealous God, a terrible God, an everlastingly angry God.

The moon slid up from behind the hills; its face was grey, speckled with bright pimples of light where the sun was reflected on its mountain peaks, and it was vast. It reared up with fearsome speed, filling the entire western sky, and the earth shook with fear, the house quivered, the sacred ornaments on Caroline's mantelpiece danced a reel of terror, and Almighty Jehovah blew, and a great wind tore across the fields, over the roof-tops, tearing, ripping, alive with the god's lust to destroy. The moon was now high up in the heavens, and Caroline, try as she might, could not lower her head; she saw the vast craters, the towering mountains that seemed to be reaching down in an attempt to tear open the sinful flesh of the earth. This was the crisis, the one moment when the angry God might decide to make an end; to surrender completely to His all-consuming rage and let the moon fall down upon the world. The moon was now covering the entire sky, the earth was cloaked in darkness, broken only by a halo of light that ran round the satellite's rim. Then came the rebirth of hope, a faint glimmer of light in the western sky, that grew larger by the second, became a crescent of cold blue, and presently developed into a patch of unclouded sky. The moon was passing away; it would race out into the heavens, become a speck of light, until drawn back by the Almighty the following day. For twenty-four hours man was safe.

II

The sin in Caroline's heart became a canker, and Satan Atomo, no doubt gloating over his conquest, made sure temptation was always before her. The young man seemed to live in the garden. He hoed the black earth that glowered beneath the linen-white flowers, he trimmed the dark green grass with a scythe, and all the time his naked brown back screamed its untranslatable message to Caroline, so that her mind became a hothouse of searing, forbidden thoughts. She kept away from the window for as long as she could, walked round and round the room, and prayed silently to Almighty Jehovah for forgiveness, but always, whenever her attention flagged, she came back to that fatal hole in the curtain.

It was inevitable that her guilty secret would be discovered.

"What are you doing?" Aunt Mabs was standing behind her, and Caroline spun around, her eyes dilated with terror. Aunt Mabs pushed her roughly to one side, then peeped through the gaping hole herself. When she turned round her face was unexpectedly sad.

"How long has this been going on?" she asked.

"For a long time," Caroline answered, for to lie was to bring down Jehovah's certain wrath.

"I see," the woman nodded slowly. "Why do you watch him?"

Caroline thought carefully, then answered:

"Because he is beautiful."

Aunt Mabs nodded again, then said: "Beautiful" before leaving the room.

Caroline waited—waited for hours. She would be beaten, of that there was no doubt, but why had Jehovah not chastised her Himself long since. Could it be Uncle Carl was to be

His instrument, because the God's time was fully occupied in punishing the world?

Uncle Carl brought up her supper tray as usual, and under his arm he carried a large book. Caroline recognized it as the Book, written by the holy Elijah Ebenezer Brown, as dictated to him by Almighty Jehovah Himself in the year One. The Uncle did not speak, but made a gesture denoting she was to eat her supper, and sat silently staring at the carpet, only looking up when she pushed the plate to one side.

"You can read your letters?"

"Yes, Uncle, the gracious Aunt taught me to read."

"That is well." He handed her the Book. "Open it—to the first page."

Caroline turned the hard cover, it was old and possibly had once encased another book.

"Read," commanded the Uncle.

"THE WORD OF JEHOVAH AS WRITTEN BY THE HOLY ELIJAH EBENEZER BROWN WHILST IN THE SPIRIT."

"And!" Uncle Carl's voice was low.

"JEHOVAH CREATED HE MAN IN HIS OWN IMAGE."

"Close the book and give it to me."

Caroline obeyed, knowing this was not going to be something simple like a thrashing; this would be worse, much worse.

"Jehovah created He man in His own image," Uncle Carl repeated the text, and Caroline remembered seeing the blazing letters printed on a banner, carried by the children on their way to Sabbath school, "and because Almighty Jehovah is beautiful Himself, then all men must be beautiful also." His cold eyes switched their gaze from the bedside rug, and stared straight at the girl.

"You thought the young man beautiful?"

"Yes, gracious Uncle, and I sinned . . ."

The Uncle raised his hand.

The Monster

"You did not sin in that, for it is good that one gaze upon the beauty that Jehovah has created. Your sin is a far greater one."

Caroline trembled and waited for the enormity of her transgressions to be revealed.

"Your sin is that of ugliness. Listen to me, and I will read the holy word."

Uncle Carl opened the good book, and began to read slowly, raising his voice in the traditional style, so his words were full and sonorous.

"In the beginning Almighty Jehovah gave the world to man as his playground. The entire earth was his, and the fruits thereof, the sea, and that which lived therein; the air above in which he might besport himself, and next to the Almighty, man was the lord of creation.

"So great was Jehovah's love he gave gifts beyond price; the ability to speak over large distances, chariots that raced faster than the wind, magic wings that took man above the earth, and the power to hunt under the sea. And the children of man dwelt in fine houses, were clad in soft linen; white bread lay daily upon their tables, and Jehovah spoke to them every seventh day. And he spake thus: 'All that is upon the earth is yours, but all that is in the heavens is mine.'

"Now it came to pass that Satan Atomo walked the earth in those days, and he whispered into the ears of men: 'Why should you not go out into the heavens? The moon is bright, the stars are diamonds beyond price; go forth, and I will protect you.'

"And men made strange chariots and they went forth into the heavens, and Jehovah struck out in his anger. He blazed fire and brimstone upon the earth, and He ate up the great houses, the chariots, the magic wings, and many men died, even unto three parts of men died.

"Then the daughters of men, in their fear, took unto themselves the sons of Satan Atomo, and they did bring forth monsters.

"And Jehovah brought down the moon, and it hovered over the earth, and His voice spoke from a thunder cloud. 'Ye shall destroy all that is not born in my image.'

"And all those that still followed in the ways of the Godly obeyed this commandment. They took the ugly, the monster-born, and burnt them on the altar, and behold the smoke of the burning was good unto the Almighty, and He did withhold His hand, and the moon fell not on to the earth, and some men lived."

Uncle Carl slammed the book closed with such force, Caroline jumped, then he spoke in the same awesome tone.

"A thousand summers have passed, and rarely are monsters born, but when they are, the people take them into the temple and burn them upon the altar."

Caroline at first did not understand, then the man's cold, expressionless stare relayed its message, and she whimpered:

"I'm not a monster."

"Child, can you not see?" The Uncle snapped out the question. "Put out your hand. Now I will lay mine alongside. Look. Mine is shaped by the Almighty, yours . . . Do not force me to describe what your eyes must see. Look at my face, then feel your own, the skin—the monstrous growth that covers your head. Can't you understand that I feel sick in your presence, and I have gazed upon you for nigh on sixteen years. Think how that young man would react were he to see you as you are. He would hand you over to the temple elders for burning, as indeed I should have long since."

Caroline looked at the horror that was her hands with new eyes; the difference she had always known, and accepted. Now truth had been savagely thrust through the doors of

The Monster

her consciousness, and her body screamed with repulsion. She was more than ugly, more than hideous—she was the monster-born. A blot that should be wiped away, a loathsome fragment fit only for burning.

"Why," she sobbed, "why did you not hand me over at birth?"

"Our sin was great," the Uncle nodded, and a tear ran down his otherwise expressionless face, "but my sister was young, and much loved. She hid you until it was too late. If I had given you up, they would have taken her also, and my foolish, soft love overcame my sacred duty. We have lived in fear all these years, your Aunt and I. We felt that as Almighty Jehovah had withheld His hand, perhaps He understood, but who can calculate His mysterious ways? He struck down your mother, He burnt your father with a thunderflash, and we—and you, He has spared. But I dread lest you be seen."

"Forgive me," Caroline sat with lowered head, "my sin is great," but the tired man shook his head.

"No, child, the sin is mine. I should have handed you over for burning, and you would not be suffering now."

He took up the book, and left without uttering a further word.

III

Caroline opened her door and crept out on to the landing. The house slept; the world—Jehovah slept, for the silence was absolute. She trod softly down the stairs, tip-toed along the hall and opened the front door.

Outside the sky was a dark blue roof, pinpointed with stars, and she was afraid, for there was so much emptiness, no comforting walls, and the night breeze was an evil thing that tore at her robe. Only the great urge stopped her from rushing back into the house, for she must go out into the wild

lands; to die perhaps, but it would be a clean death, and no harm would come to the Uncle and Aunt.

The rough road was cruel to her bare feet, and the starlit gloom was alive with gibbering shadows that mocked and tried vainly with voiceless mouths to shout her presence aloud. She passed houses, all built of wood and painted black, so that Jehovah might not see them, but of course He did; one had been shaken down. Only the temple was built of stone. Jehovah's statue stood a little way to the right; thirty feet tall, the work of three generations. His stern face looked upwards, gazing with sightless eyes at the stars; in His right hand He held a seven-thonged flail, and in His left a forked thunderflash. On the base was etched the familiar words:

JEHOVAH CREATED HE MAN IN HIS OWN IMAGE.

Caroline fled from the temple, fled from the presence of dread Jehovah, and ran past the last few houses, until she came within sight of the open wild lands that stretched out great arms to greet her. She did not know about the night watch, the two men who prowled the village limits, ever alert lest some raiding party from afar should suddenly strike. They came out of the shadows and shouted:

"Who are you? Stop."

Caroline turned on her tracks and ran, and the hard pounding of booted feet came after her. She darted between two houses, stumbled across a cultivated back garden, tore her gown clambering through a low hedge. But now doors were opening, people were pouring out; she ran into a man when turning a corner, and he saw her face.

"Monster—a monster!"

He clutched her gown and it ripped as she broke away, and the cry was relayed from mouth to mouth, until the earth—the very heavens—were screaming the dreadful word:

"Monster—monster!"

The Monster

She had never run before in her life, never before walked on bare earth, and her strength was soon exhausted. Somehow, she had come back into the main street, and there was Jehovah, standing before His temple, staring up at the stars, and judging the world. She collapsed at His feet, and looked up at His stone face.

"Mercy, Almighty, mercy on me—a monster."

But the face was pitiless, the great flail was poised above her, and the pursuers, many with lighted torches, were closing in, and there was no hope anywhere, either on the earth, in the badlands, or in the stars.

They pulled her roughly to her feet, ripped the tattered gown from her body, and their faces became twisted with disgust when the malformed shape was revealed.

"Where did you come from?" a watchman struck her across the face; "who's been hiding you?"

That was a question that must not be answered, and she tried not to scream when they punched her stomach, kicked her and flung her to the ground.

The temple Elders were gaunt from much fasting, and one had a large pin driven through his cheeks, and the crowd drew back, for he was very holy. His voice was muffled, as the pin stopped his tongue from functioning naturally, and his face was like Jehovah's, as though it, too, were hewn from stone.

"Cease. No one in the village would dare harbour her. If they had, we would have been smitten long since."

Caroline marvelled, and looked up again at the stone God.

"She has come in from the badlands, a gift from Jehovah, so that we might sacrifice. Bring her into the temple, and let us give praise."

She was dragged in through the doorway, across the paved floor, speckled with colour where the red kneeling cushions

were laid out in neat rows; up on to the raised altar, and tied to the stone cross. Her back was pressed against the centre pillar, each wrist was lashed to a crosspiece, and her ankles tied firmly to the base.

Torches were lit and placed in wall sconces, a mirror of polished bronze was placed before her so that the entire congregation should be able to see the vileness of the Satan-born. They piled faggots at her feet, and the priests began to chant, and the people responded.

"Jehovah, created He man."

"In His own image," the voices behind her shouted.

"With one head."

"And two arms."

"Two legs, only two legs."

One priest with a particularly sonorous voice carried on in solo.

"And at the bottom of the legs, shall be two feet."

"Yea, there shall be two feet."

"And at the end of the two arms shall be two hands."

"Yea, there shall be two hands."

The priest raised his voice to a near scream.

"And what shall there be on the head?"

"There shall be two ears."

"And how shall the ears be shaped?"

"They will be large, and black, and shall hang down, even to the shoulders."

"And what shall be on the face?"

"There shall be two eyes, one large, one small, and two noses, and twin tusks will grow forth from the cheeks, and the lips shall be black and spread wide, and the teeth shall never be covered. Thus saith the Almighty Jehovah."

"And what shall be on the hands?"

"Two fingers, and they shall have talons, even as the feet hath two toes, and a small tail, not more than twelve

inches long, shall hang from the spine, even as Jehovah has decreed."

Caroline was crying now, not because they had lighted the faggots, but because she could see her reflection in the bronze mirror. She was ugly—it was good that all this ugliness was about to be burnt. She had no lovely brown wrinkled skin; hers was obscenely white and smooth; her head, instead of being nobly domed and ridged, was covered with a grotesque mop of corn-coloured growth, which covered her horrible small ears; she only had one nose, and her eyes were both the same size, but, and this was worst of all, not delicately addled, but blue, surrounded with white, and fringed by the same hideous growth that marred her head. Each hand had four long fingers and a shorter one that stuck out at an angle, and there were five toes to each foot. Her lips were red, not black, and covered her teeth, which should have been irregular, one behind the other; hers were disgustingly white and even.

"And the skin shall be wrinkled, and the face pitted, even as the face of Father Moon, and there shall be no furry growth, either on the head or other parts, for this is an abomination in Jehovah's sight, as it has been, and will be, for evermore."

"Cursed be the Satan-Born," the priest chanted.

"May they be cursed for ever."

Caroline heard Jehovah laugh as the flames licked upwards, and He laughed with a million voices, over a million years, and before merciful oblivion came, she laughed too. In that last revealing moment she understood.



He pushed back the hood of her cloak to expose waves of dark coppery hair.
(Art: John Stewart)

Janet Fox

HOW JAQUEREL MADE WAR IN BEL AZHURRA

Janet Fox lives in Osage City, Kansas, and has been writing fantasy and horror fiction for some years. Her short stories have appeared in magazines and anthologies such as Shadows, The Twilight Zone and Sword and Sorceress. Her recent novels include the "Scorpio" series for young adults, published by Ace Books; writing as "Alex MacDonough", two volumes have appeared so far: Scorpio Rising and Scorpio Descending. Janet also edits and publishes the excellent small press-oriented market report Scavenger's Newsletter. The novella that follows marks her debut in the pages of Fantasy Tales.

The storm-cloak of the thief Jaquerel was a representation of her travels, for it bore the irregular stains of rain and snow and in its creases were samples of all the soils she'd crossed. Now she shivered and pulled its stiff thickness up around her ears as a cold wind pushed hard against the tuljes and swayed

in the ghost-webs that hung from the knotted branches of the ancient hoar-oaks. She imagined she heard the thin ululation of a nightdemon beyond a fold in the hills, but surely that was her own imagination, for this area was so sparsely settled there could not be enough primitive minds gathered to bring even one of their crude demons into being. A windspinner swept across the path of Jaquerel's witch-mare, sending the high-strung beast straight up, brushy tail thrashing like that of a startled squirrel. Half unseated, Jaq clung hard and fought the mare to a trembling standstill.

From the top of the next hill she was glad to see the firegleam from the hunting lodge where she was bound, and she kept a steady pace toward it, even though the wind hid it, disclosed it, hid it again behind tossing banks of foliage.

A personal demon of suspicion that had become her most faithful companion caused her to circle and approach the lodge from behind, though it looked peaceful enough and she was thoroughly tired and cold from the journey. She slipped from the mare's back and walked lightfootedly toward the lodge which was sturdily if rudely made with unpeeled logs and clay chinking that had fallen away in some places. Through a narrow aperture she peered into the smoky interior. The meager furniture of the place was overturned and smashed. One man lay drunkenly openmouthed before a smouldering fire on the hearth. Another, not quite as far gone in drink, had enough of his wits about him to be pawing a terrified girl he had cornered. Jaq appraised her age at about twelve or thirteen. The other two men whiled away the time by an archery contest, the target being a plump, balding man in a suit of forester's green, she guessed the gamekeeper of this lodge and the girl, his daughter. As she watched, a man in the handsome blue plush cloak of a nobleman nocked an arrow and drew back his bowstring with a movement that was powerful and subtle at once. "Fool," he said as he took

How Jaquerel Made War In Bel Azhurra

aim. "You should have known better than to greet Pyr with an insult." And he let the arrow fly to thunk into the log wall beside the cringing man's shoulder.

"Please sir, I meant no offense. I said only . . ."

"You said only that you were glad of my brother's approaching majority and you hoped he would rule in Bel Azhurra for years to come. The weak don't deserve to rule," and here he swore an oath that was alien in Jaquerel's ears. "Hold still now." This next arrow went in inches from the gamekeeper's head and the older man's face turning a waxy white, he stiffened against the wall and half slid down on buckling knees.

"You can come closer than that, my Lord," jested the guardsman beside him.

With an uncomfortable feeling Jaq realized that this Pyr's name was the one signed to her Guild contract. That he was a halfling she already knew, but his appearance startled her a little all the same as he came to stand in the glow of firelight from the hearth. His tightcurled hair gave off glints of bronze-green and the cast of his face was angular, with high, jutting cheekbones that shadowed the eyes. When he moved his head a feral disc of blood red appeared in each eye.

Jaquerel backed away from the scene, frowned a moment, then began to gather fat, green tulipods from where they had fallen under the close-clustering trees. She tied them up in a corner of her cloak and the witchmare was an unwilling scaffold as she pulled herself up to the edge of the steeply pitched roof. She hoped the room's inhabitants would be so fully occupied they wouldn't hear the pods fall into the fire. She waited under the far-away icy green moon just long enough for the heat to burst the pods with an explosive pop and begin to spew their vile-smelling smoke, then let out the piercing scream of a night-hunting slynx.

As three dark shapes burst in confusion from the flung-open door, she shouted down the chimney. "Gamekeeper, take your daughter and escape; I'll clear the way."

One or two leftover pods shot past the heads of the coughing men, broke and splattered their boots, but when they looked up she was scrambling down the opposite slant of the roof, giving another slynx-cry to draw attention. She dropped to the ground, staggered, recovered, caught the mare's trailing reins and swung to the saddle just as one man came pounding around a corner of the lodge. Light was not good and she heard the arrow thrash off into the foliage as she urged the mare into the shadows of the trees, giving one last drawn-out scream.

Warmed a little from the activity she waited long enough for excitement to die down and for greasy smoke to disperse from a room, and then rode boldly toward the front door of the lodge. At the sound of hoofbeats, the men in the lodge appeared at the door, bows drawn.

With an air of injured innocence she swung down from the saddle, arms out, hands empty. "I'm no enemy. I was to meet here with Pyr, half-brother to the Warlord of Bel Azhurra under the auspices of the Guild of Honor." She flourished a parchment. "His seal." An archer lowered his bow a little, then stared at her, amazed. "It was you I saw riding into the trees—on this long-legged beast, or, I think it was." His hand on the bowstring trembled with nervousness or anticipation. "Say the word, my Lord."

Pyr grumbled something under his breath and reluctantly the guardsman eased back on the bowstring. Pyr motioned for her to approach and opened the door further so the ruddy light from within enveloped her. He ignored the contract she presented and studied her in silence with eyes that now looked a little lazy and heavy-lidded. With a slow, proprietary motion that she didn't like he pushed back the hood of her cloak to

How Jaquerel Made War In Bel Azhurra

expose waves of dark coppery hair, lightning-lit across the forehead by a single platinum witch-lock. "They told me the thief Jaquerel was crafty, that she moved like shadows on silk. I told them they were fools, but perhaps . . . I was wrong."

"I didn't come across two kingdoms to be threatened by your underlings or to be kept shivering on the doorstep of this hovel."

"Enough!" His voice strained between amusement and anger. "Stop it here before I kill you. I have need of you, but my birthright contains a savagery that I cannot always control. His arm descended heavily across her shoulders and she was more pushed than ushered through the door. The awful smell of tulipods still lingered in the smoky air, but otherwise all was much the same, even to the drunken soldier who lay propped against one wall. Sporadically he coughed or rattled from the smoke still in his lungs. She was pleased to see that in the confusion the gamekeeper and his daughter had escaped. From the litter in the room Pyr found a bench still intact and dragged it before the hastily re-made fire. Jaquerel threw off the damp cloak and shivered before the blaze. Pyr paced, his shadow crossing her at intervals. She had almost forgotten that she was tired; now the pervasive warmth lapped about her like enveloping waters. She supposed she was safe enough until Pyr had carried out his precious plan. He was explaining it now, more to himself than to her, it seemed, punctuating his discourse with oaths and sudden angry statements like, "Cowardly brother," and "By Klemeth, the bastard son shall rule in Bel Azhurra." She was nodding by the time he had finished his instructions, but she forced herself to open her eyes and confront him.

"Of course we will swear an oath," she said, "to insure loyalty to each other until the business has been settled in an honorable manner." With an angry glare he withdrew the

hand that had been playing with the laces of her doeskin shirt, as if in all innocence.

"I don't need the gods; I make my own destiny," he shouted, nearly upsetting the bench as he jumped to his feet.

Jaquerel rose, too, very quietly. "Without an oath I would run for the border with the prize rather than walk back into your tender keeping once you no longer have need of me."

She saw a feral anger sweep over Pyr. If there had been hackles they would have risen. Then she saw him, with great effort, control the anger. In a way that was even more terrible. "All that they told me," he said softly. "Now I begin to believe it."

"We will swear by Yaggi, patron god of thieves."

"No, No, by the Narnotha, the terrible horned war gods."

"Agreed." Jaquerel knew little of these people's gods, but war gods were generally active in these benighted kingdoms and barbaric enough to take a blood oath seriously and to punish any mortal who dared break it. Pyr drew the knife at his hip and stood waiting with a challenging half-smile playing about his lips. With a look of composure she had to work at, Jaq extended her arm to him, hand held palm up. Blood welled up before she felt anything, so keen was the knife, and then Pyr was piercing his own wrist and drop by drop their blood was caught and mingled in a wooden cup. As they swore loyalty to each other before the Narnotha, Pyr cast the cup into the fire where there was a small explosion and puff of smoke, less spectacular than a tuljpod but enough of an omen to prove that somewhere a god had heard and acknowledged the sealing of the pact.

There was a stir at the palace of the Warlord of Bel Azhurra. Maids bustled about the ancient dwelling, making little dint in the accumulated debris of centuries, yet creating, here and there islands of cleanliness in the sea of general clutter. "She

How Jaquerel Made War In Bel Azhurra

is here," went the whisper from scullery maid to pantry warder to major-domo. "The Warlord's bride."

In his chambers Canthus IV, omnipotent Warlord and Leader of Men, paced the room and flung his hands about in nervous gestures. "If she is here, then I must go and meet her. And if she is here to be married, it seems I must marry her. But I've never seen her and from all reports she is a puny, milk-skinned, whining wretch."

"What do you care? She is of royal blood and tradition says—" The Regent continued in this vein. He was a very old man now, but he stood straight for all he had to prop himself up with a silverheaded cane. He had received his wounds in the last campaigns of Canthus III, the present ruler's grandfather. Canthus found, as he approached his majority, he grew ever more tired of hearing about tradition, of everything he must do for the good of his kingdom, his people. He wondered if there was a time to do what one really wanted in the midst of all this rigamarole. He let the old fool ramble on. After his ceremonial coming-of-age this evening, perhaps he would at last gain the courage to shout, "shut up!" to the loquacious old—

"Besides, once you get an heir, or so, you can banish her to a convent in the Upland Wastes and disport yourself with whom you choose." The old man eyed him nastily, a snicker rattling the phlegm in his bony throat.

"You talk like I'm some kind of prize bullock being sent out to stud." The Regent just looked at the frail youth with his thin frizz of apricot-colored beard and myopic blue eyes and shook his head dourly.

"Not quite that, lad. But you can't leave the Lady fretting away below. Don't you wish to at least view her?"

"I suppose. Let me meet with her in private, in my room of scrolls. I won't be gawked at by snickering courtiers. But if she's as ugly as I've heard—as unsuitable—then I'll

pack her back into the carriage and send her back to her father—with my regrets."

The Regent cleared his throat and Canthus knew he was thinking something like, "Not unless you want to risk war, you won't." Narnotha, the old fool didn't even have to speak to say too much.

The room of scrolls was Canthus' favorite place. His warmongering forebears had gutted the libraries of a dozen kingdoms and put these here as prizes, but Canthus spent as much time poring over them as he could steal away from the never-ending riding, archery and swordsmanship lessons. But for all the calming effect of this quiet room with its reflective, dark paneling and high arched ceiling, he felt a wave of nervousness when the woman entered, an alien, an invader, with the hateful feminine rustle of silken skirts. When he got up the nerve to look at her, she knelt and bowed her head to properly acknowledge his magnificence, but there was a fleeting moment, (or so he thought) when her eyes had flicked over him and she had looked—amused. By the horned gods, he would show this puling, whey-faced wench— But she was nothing like puny, he observed in the midst of his rage, and he did not think her skin so colourless for all the coating of cosmetics she had over her face like a mask.

He had kept her kneeling there for some moments while his faculty for observation replaced his rage, but when he allowed her to rise, he did not miss the smooth, athletic grace with which she moved. And, though he had no desire to be ungallant, neither was she as young as she was supposed to be, though he decided it was her attitude of self-possession, almost of amused arrogance, that gave her away. When the full knowledge came that he faced an imposter, he almost proclaimed it aloud, yet something stopped him. A mere woman, he thought, could do little to harm him, especially

How Jaquerel Made War In Bel Azhurra

as he was always well guarded. And since she was so much better than what he had been expecting, it surely wouldn't hurt to postpone the announcement of her imposture, at least until after the wedding night.

There was a brusque tap on the ornately carved door and Pyr entered without being asked. It sometimes needled Canthus how this halfling bastard slunk about the place like some half-tamed beast that had slipped its leash. Now he was looking at Canthus' bride in a way that should have made her blush, though she was only returning the stare, brazen-eyed. "I congratulate you on your new bride," said Pyr. "She looks (his eyes traveled her length in a practiced and insulting way) sound in wind and limb." Then Pyr leaned over and whispered an obscene observation in Canthus' ear. The Warlord felt blood rushing to his face, and hoped he wasn't blushing and knew all the same he was.

"Until this evening when the tomb is opened," said Pyr, "and my best to you, my Lady." He lifted her hand to his lips.

Canthus reminded himself that he must speak to the Regent about having Pyr removed to some more obscure post—perhaps a garrison in the Lowland Marshes.

Later that evening Canthus took his place with some nervousness in a procession that moved in ritual slowness through a labyrinthine series of tunnels beneath the palace. The only light was a smoky illumination from torches carried by the marchers. A charnel breath wafted along the damp passageways; the walls glistened with beads of condensation. At last they stopped before a mortared wall, discolored with the passing years, and hung with the delicate tatters of old spiderwebs. Two priests began to chip at the crumbling mortar.

"It hasn't been opened since the death of my grandfather," said Canthus. "My own father refused the ritual and as a

result was called a coward, but the kingdom has had unbroken peace for fifty years."

"What happened to your father?"

"An accident. Ice on the step of a tower staircase."

Jaquerel made an almost inaudible noise of disbelief. "What exactly is this burningbright?" she asked, for Pyr had told her very little of the gem she was to steal.

There was a muffled gasp of awe among the throng as dry mortar crumbled and a large stone fell inward. More stones fell rattling onto the pavement, and there was an irregular opening into the tomb. In utter silence now the marchers went inside and gathered around a raised sarcophagus of dark metal, the corrosion of years etched deeply into it. Jaq winced a little as the priest lifted the heavy lid. Guttering light played on no decayed corpse or bones, but only on a layer of darkly charred ash. Among the ashes lay a beautiful fillet of braided golden wires. A small pendant stone shot out hot, red-orange gleams; it was difficult to look directly at it without filling one's vision with dancing golden discs.

A priest lifted the circlet and put it into Jaquerel's hands, accompanying the gesture with a drawn-out ritual chant. It seemed the gem was in her keeping until she crowned Canthus with it at the marriage ceremony that same night; no wonder Pyr's plan depended on her so strongly. Still, though the jewel was in her custody, so too was she in the custody of the two priests and the aged Regent. As she left the dim confines of the tomb, the old man leaned on her rather than on his cane and whispered to her.

"You don't think much of our young Warlord, do you?"

"I make no judgements on my Lord," said Jaquerel, staring shyly at the floor.

"It's in your face and I can't say I blame you. Well, you may be luckier than you think. You see this little trinket? The burningbright gives a man—unusual vigor." He poked her in

How Jaquerel Made War In Bel Azhurra

the ribs with a skinny finger and laughed wheezily. She would have liked to send him sprawling to the pavement, but this didn't seem quite the time for it.

"Now you must pardon me while I dress for the ceremony," she said, pausing at the door to her chambers, which she was certain would keep out the beady-eyed priests and the old goat as well.

"Certainly, my dear."

She gave them a simpering smile, and closed the door in their faces. Hastily, she rummaged in the bottom of one of her trunks until she found her doeskins, rolled up small, and a length of silvery cord. She had just tied the last thong when she heard a gasp of surprise that sounded like someone stepping on a bellows, and the clatter of unsteady steps and a cane. "That old lecher was at the keyhole," she observed, and quickly made fast the end of the cord just as someone began to pound on the door. The cord burned her hands as she quickly rapelled down the roughhewn wall. Too soon the cord gave way, probably loosened from above, and she went sprawling, bruising hip and shoulder as she fell. No sooner had she gained her feet when a burly guardsman came running toward her. She dived for the protection of shadows along the wall, drawing her knife. He was still blundering forward when she sprang, and his momentum helped drive the weapon in. There were more cries, more guards, as she whirled and ran, keeping to the shadows. She dashed across an open space and into the stable, startling a row of horses in their stalls to snorting and stamping. She chose one of the largest, a black-maned bay, bridled and saddled him, finishing just as a commotion of voices approached the stable door. She rode right into the midst of them, scattering priest and soldier alike.

Swinging along to the big bay's tireless lope, she thought over all that she had been told, all she had learned of the

burningbright. She didn't quite like the idea of Pyr having . . . unusual vigor, as the old man had termed it; he was bad enough as he was. She decided to make a detour before meeting Pyr at the hunting lodge.

Foam flew from the bay's plunging shoulders as Jaq pulled him to a stop before the lodge. Pyr lounged in the doorway, smiling his feral smile. As she approached him, he grabbed her arm and, despite her angry struggles, hauled her inside. "Remember your pact," she panted. "You gave me safe conduct back to my own land. Take your hands off me or the gods will—"

"The Narnotha will do as they have done for some years—nothing. I've been trying to decide, as I waited here for you, just what to do first."

"You dare break a blood oath?" She said it loudly, hoping for some sign, a sound of thunder, a vision, but nothing came. Pyr simply looked smug. She reached surreptitiously for the dagger at her belt, but he saw the movement, countered it, catching her wrist in a numbing grip, then drawing the knife and casting it away.

"You thought yourself so clever, thief, and I flattered you by saying I believed the boasts they made about you, but you were in my power all the time. Now I'll just take the burningbright; I want to be at my best when I take my revenge." He took the belt pouch and released her as he greedily opened it. Surprise stunned him for a moment when he realized the bag held only a twist of scrap metal. It was just long enough for her to reach down and pick up a stick of firewood from the debris on the floor. "You yourself broke the oath," he said.

"No, my intention was to give you the burningbright as we agreed, at the feet of the Narnotha themselves in the Temple of War, but now I see that I need not give it to you at all." His hands closed on her throat with crushing force, and she was

How Jaquerel Made War In Bel Azhurra

hardly aware of the reflex that swung the chunk of wood, or the solid sound it made as it connected just above Pyr's hipbone. She struggled free as he fell.

She was in the saddle and urging on the bay when she heard and ignored a shouted warning. An arrow followed it, pinning her leg to the saddle through the fleshy part of the calf. She hunched over with the pain, buried both fists in the thick black mane. When she had outdistanced them for the moment, she stopped to break loose the head of the arrow and to pull out the shaft. Blood welled in the ragged tear, but she could only tie it up hastily and ride on.

The bay scrambled, grunting up an incline and stood panting at the top as Jaq looked back the way she had come. A dusthaze heralded pursuit; she guessed six or seven riders by the outlines she could count. As she laid her hand comfortingly on her mount's heavily muscled neck, she felt the moisture of sweat, but she urged him on.

The outlines of Bel Azhurra appeared before her, all sharp edges, like a city in a dream. She looked down and saw that the bandage on her leg was blood-soaked. She wasn't sure that she was even thinking coherently, but it seemed somehow important that the burningbright be kept out of Pyr's hands. She galloped into the city through the gates, now left open during the day in this long season of peace. She did not have to look back, for Pyr and his soldiers had narrowed the gap on their fresh mounts and her bay galloped drunkenly. She could hear the hooves of their horses, their loud shouts.

Jaq rode down a wide street, her haste disrupting the somnolent traffic of midday, pedestrians scrambling out of her path. As she rounded a corner she rode into a marketplace filled with people, but neither she nor the bay could stop their headlong flight. The gelding's bluff shoulder sent a booth over

sideways, spilling produce into the street, and he vaulted a pole on which hung the leathery bodies of dried leahens. But this confusion was, Jaq knew, nothing to what would happen when Pyr's men rode through in pursuit.

The Temple of War was an ugly building, squat and thick-walled, of a red-veined marble with all the aesthetic appeal of a bloodshot eye. It was in a quiet, almost deserted quarter of the city Bel Azhurra, as if the interests of the populace had shifted and with it, its centers of population. Jaq reined in and dismounted. The bay stood, head down, his breath rattling. She knew he could go no farther, but it didn't seem to matter; by the buzzing in her head and the way reality bannered like a curtain in the wind, neither could she. She had lost too much blood in the jarring ride that had brought her here. She had only one hope—that the overrated War Gods were not so vitiated that they could ignore the breaking of a blood oath under their bronze noses.

As she had noticed when she came here before, the temple was falling into ruin. Creepers had set their vegetable footprints onto the smooth marble and inside, dust had padded the stone floors and corrosion had eaten at the tall statues where they stood on pedestals of onyx, each figure a little uglier than the one before it. She retrieved the burningbright from under a pile of debris where she had hidden it. "Gods of War!" she shouted, her voice echoing about the vaulted ceiling, disturbing a hightflit that blundered about for a moment before finding a crevice to hide in. "Can you ignore one who counts an oath by your names as nothing?"

The voice, when it came, was as dry and sibilant as the wind rustling gently in dry leaves. She could hardly make out the words.

"The years of peace, they've taken their toll. We grow weak and indolent."

How Jaquerel Made War In Bel Azhurra

She heard the tread of someone outside. When the door burst open, she saw Pyr flanked by several of his armed men. He paused, calling into dark emptiness. "Ho, Klemith, I still do your bidding, even in a time of weaklings and cowards."

"Greetings, Pyr. It was wrong of you to break your oath even to an outlander and a woman. If you weren't such a favorite of mine—" The voice was indulgent, like that of a doting grandfather.

"This I don't believe," said the thief Jaquerel, leaning back against the cold onyx as the last of her strength left her. The fiery gleam of the jewel made her eyes water.

The weakest, almost inaudible voice creaked from a place near her ear. "Klemith is a fool. Put on the fillet."

The jewel felt warm as it dangled against her forehead. It was as if a stiff wind blew away all the fatigue and pain, leaving her with a tingle of unspent energy suffusing her whole body. In the dimness as she held out her hand, she thought she saw a faint golden aura emanating from the skin. And when she looked down at the wound on her leg, she saw that it was drawing together, healing even as she watched.

Pyr tried a smile, discarded it. "You can't wear that. It's mine. Even the gods want me to wear it. If you give it to me I swear that I'll let you depart in peace."

Even as he spoke he was backing away, though he didn't seem to be aware of it; there was a fierce light in her eyes, a not-quite-human light.

When she stepped outside the temple, she saw that a crowd had followed them from the marketplace. The people made a low murmuring sound and someone shouted, "Kill the halfling!" It rekindled Pyr's rage to realize that his victim was turning on him. He drew his sword with a sinister, metallic hiss, cut at her, but she dodged. It didn't seem quite possible for anyone to dodge so quickly, but Jaq did it, feeling confident, ebullient. The crowd cheered involuntarily, for all that Pyr's

soldiers were still among them. Someone who stood at the back of the milling mob tossed a sword to clatter on the stones at Jaq's feet. As she picked it up, she could never remember feeling such a sense of well-being. She wasn't exactly physically stronger, just incredibly energized. She moved like a machine, without mistakes and without tiring. As Pyr fell back, the crowd let out a roar of triumph. A stinging blow catapulted his weapon out of his hand and he stood there, vulnerable and half-stunned. Some confidence let her step back, waiting with a half-smile for him to retrieve his weapon.

She saw him nod to someone beyond her shoulder and she was grabbed from behind. Her elbow elicited a gasp but more pairs of hands were fastening on her.

"Cut her throat," ordered Pyr, "and bring me the burning-bright." There was a low outcry from the crowd.

"Coward," she shouted. "You know I can defeat you in a fair fight."

Whistles and catcalls broke out from the onlookers, and as they surged forward, she sensed that they would be behind her, with a little urging. A burly man with a ragged eyepatch stepped from the anonymity of the crowd. "Let the bastard lord fight his own battle this time," he said. Other shouts echoed his and the ruffian who stood with dagger poised shifted from one foot to the other.

Jaq pulled one hand free, struggled to stand upright. "There may be one or two here who dare to speak against Pyr. But it seems that all fear to strike against him."

Hardly had the words been spoken when the one-eyed man caught one of Pyr's soldiers around the neck and bore him down, aided now by others in the mob. Both hands released, Jaquerel seized the dagger and would have been at Pyr's throat if a chaos of brawling bodies hadn't gotten in the way. Pyr's small force broke and ran, leaving two of their number bleeding on the pavingstones. After sporadic

How Jaquerel Made War In Bel Azhurra

cheering, the crowd, stunned by its own violence, began to break up, moving back towards their wonted occupations.

Jaq found the man with the eyepatch and extended her hand to him palm up. He met it, squinting, as if it hurt his good eye to look at her.

"It did my heart good to see the halfling take a drubbing," he growled. "My name is Falklin, and my sword is yours." He spoke the ritual words with a grin creasing his lined face, and she realized that the sword she had received so opportunely really had been his.

"But to no purpose," she said. "In my own country I am a thief of high standing in the Guild of Honor. I'll return there now with this bauble, having no further need of swords or swordsmen."

"The wearer of the burningbright can speak so?"

"It is only a prize I can take back and sell at a fat profit to that old skinflint, the Jeweler Hmfft."

Swarthy skin crinkled at the corner of Falklin's eye. "You will remove it, then?"

"Of course . . . when it suits me."

He moved closer. "I have waited long for such a chance as this, when I could have my revenge on Lord Pyr, who half blinded me, turned me out of my shop and made me a renegade and a thief. All over a disagreement about a game of cards. Pyr has many enemies such as myself who would gladly gather men to make war against him."

"That is your business. I'll be about my own, that of returning home."

"I suppose you would have no objection to myself and my friends accompanying you to the border of our land, just as protection."

She looked at the scruffy cutthroat and at those who stood silently behind him, nervous and bad-tempered as curs at heel. Normally she would have decided to travel alone, yet there

was a warmth that surged in her blood like the effects of strong wine.

"I don't fear you if that is what you hoped, so therefore you may follow me to the world's edge itself, if you wish."

By that time it was too late to begin a journey, so they repaired to an inn nearby, recommended by Falklin. It was in a state of disrepair, the whole structure listing to one side like a vessel the morning after a storm. They were greeted by the landlord's wife, a red-faced, squarely built woman who did not stop talking the whole time she was showing them to their rooms at one end of a drafty corridor. Jaquerel looked around the musty bare-walled room with a shiver and thought of her cozy hearth at her house on the Street of Nine Tigers, but she was far from home and had no money for better lodgings.

She had thought she would sleep well, being exhausted, but all the happenings of the day paraded through her head, and when she did fall asleep, she heard leaden footsteps and the far-off tinny sound of war trumpets. Threatening forms seemed to gather around her, and she saw the dull gleam of bronze.

"Rise and buckle on your sword."

"Rise."

"Go away, I need sleep."

"You are no longer as other mortals. The wearer of the gem of power need not rest. There are wrongs to right in Bel Azhurra."

Jaquerel tossed on the bed, contended in her sleep with unseen influences. "There is glory to be won. Rise. Rise."

"I'll not wear it then."

"Take it off. Return it so a proper wearer may be found," but there was a tone in the voice that said the speaker knew she would not give it up.

She awoke in a sweat, the fillet like a band of hot iron across her forehead. She rose, muttering about the oven-like

How Jaquerel Made War In Bel Azhurra

temperature of the room, and buckled on the swordbelt. As she traversed the corridor in search of fresh air, she heard voices, the crash of something falling to the floor. She saw that a door was ajar and slipped up closer to peer through it.

She saw Falklin pinioned by some unknown enemy, a dagger edgewise to his throat. "You will point out the room of the thief Jaquerel and if you cry out—"

She backed into shadow as the band filed out. She counted six and made herself the seventh as they approached her room. As they cursed, looking at the empty bed in a splash of greenish moonlight, she drew her sword and drove it in between the ribs of the man who held Falklin.

"Here is she whom you seek!" she cried out. "Luckily, I need little sleep." Gesturing to Falklin to go before her, she backed out into the corridor where the narrow walls would force them to face her only two at a time. She disarmed one man with a cut to the forearm that was brought up short as the blade struck against bone. The second was a better swordsman and they engaged for several moments before she drove through his defenses and pierced him to the heart. The remaining three fell over each other to escape and she let them go. Falklin had the wounded man by the throat.

"Pyr has offered a thousand lyrae for the death of Jaquerel the thief."

"I thought it was something like that," said Falklin. "We'd best be away by dawn before word is spread through the city."

"Let him go back to Pyr with this message, that the wearer of the burningbright has now become aware of certain wrongs that must be set right."

From where he crouched by the fallen enemy, Falklin looked up at her. She had been only half aware of the dim glow in the dark hallway; now she realized that it was herself—she radiated a kind of pale light. Though there was something disquieting about it, she found herself pleased.

They roused their mounts from the stable's warm somnolence and rode out under the fading green sickle of the moon. "If you were serious about what you said before, I'll hide you in a place I know and set about finding those who hate Pyr enough to go against him," shouted Falklin above the sighing of the wind.

"That should be easy enough, yet there's something wrong about feeling like this, as if I weren't afraid."

"You're not, are you," said Falklin, an undertone of quiet awe in his voice.

Jaquerel had but to release the rein and her mount bolted into the night.

Jaquerel sat her horse on a hill above the intricately ornamented gate of a walled city. Her army, bivouacked at some distance, looked like a haphazard collection of robbers, townsmen and peasants, for the good reason that that was what they were. Below, a rider clattered through the gates, churning the white dust of the road to a plume behind him. Jaq waited as Falklin booted his sweating mount up the last incline to join her on her eminence.

"You don't look happy," she observed. "What had Lord Kharlis to say in answer to my message?"

"When I told him of our cause, he laughed in my face, but when I handed him the other message, the written one, his face turned red and his eyes popped. I think I was lucky to escape with my life. What was it you said to him?"

"I challenged him to single combat outside the city gates. I had to add a few embellishments to make sure he would come, and to put him in the proper mood for combat." She squinted into the glare of sun, saw the gates swing wide, and a single rider emerge.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" asked Falklin, as she gathered the reins. "He's a veteran of many campaigns and

How Jaquerel Made War In Bel Azhurra

they say, a devil with a sword."

"We need his troops if we are to move on Pyr. We're nothing more than a ragtag band, fit only to despoil small farms." Under her urging, the bay went headlong down the slope. As she descended toward the waiting rider, she loosened her sword in its sheath.

Lord Kharlis rode a magnificent dark grey war horse, late sun glinting slate-blue off its bunched muscles as it fretted under a tight rein. Kharlis was dark and gnarled as an hoar-oak stump, his armor and weapons richly adorned but smooth with wear all the same. His dark eyes looked levelly at her, appraising as she rode nearer—not an easy man to intimidate, yet there was a hint of indecisiveness in his movements as he saw the faint golden aura that outlined her. Sparks of energy played where her hand clenched the hilt, slid up the blade to dissipate in cold blue stars at the tip.

Still, it was too late for him to back down, and he set his grey in motion, slamming it into her bay with shuddering impact. Her sword lost none of its vigor, and she forced Kharlis to withdraw and rein in a circle to face her again.

Her point drew a bright splotch of angry red high on his shoulder. "Yield. You see the war gods hover over us. You see that you fight one not merely mortal."

"I see," he said through set teeth and came back swinging his sword, edge-on. She caught it ringingly on her own. "You can surrender. Who would keep on fighting in contention with the gods themselves?"

"After the insult you have given me," panted Kharlis, "I would," and he came on again.

Jaq realized with a sick feeling that she would have to kill him. If he had not been so skilled, so dangerous a fighter, she might risk stalling until her superhuman strength outlasted his, but though chosen of the gods she might be, she knew she was not invulnerable.

The fight continued for several minutes more. Kharlis thrust and missed, leaving her scant seconds to strike, no time to calculate, to attempt to wound only. Her blade struck deep where neck met shoulder, blood jetted, and then slowly like a toppling tree the dark old warrior fell from the saddle.

She stood over him, her eyes burning, then knelt as she heard his voice. "To kill when you don't really wish to—this is the secret of the soldier," he whispered dryly.

There were hoofbeats behind her, though she heard them but dimly. Falkin slammed her between the shoulderblades, and she turned suddenly, sword upraised as if to strike.

"If I had tempered my insult," she said, lowering the weapon, just as abruptly, as if all strength had drained from her arm.

"How does one temper an insult," he asked confusedly. "How does one win if the killing stroke is not given. You still do not know yourself—what you can become."

She blinked away the burning of her eyes. "No, but I fear I begin to."

"We will talk to Kharlis' Second. There should be little trouble in securing an alliance now."

In his library Canthus sat, half buried in bits of parchment and unrolled scrolls, as was his wont, yet he sat staring at the wall, as if dreaming. He wondered what had happened to his bride after that disastrous wedding night. Pyr would say nothing, and he might have feared for her safety, except that there was so much of anger and so little of triumph in Pyr's silence.

He shook himself out of his reverie and forced himself to continue his translations. No doubt he would never see her again, yet—As he unrolled a recalcitrant curl of parchment, a thin sheet of leather slipped out, marked with the crabbed script that was the handwriting of his father:

How Jaquerel Made War In Bel Azhurra

Those who would glorify war above all things are fools. The burning-bright has a secret which will plainly show the futility of battles and contention. The secret is carved into a stone of the wall behind the oak-leaf screen in the Chapel of Blue Windows.

Eager as he never was to take part in chase or mock-combat, Canthus rose, scattering scrolls and quills, and hurried toward the Chapel of Blue Windows, a room little used by the inhabitants of the dwelling. Light strained in undersea gloom through the high-placed windows made up of a thousand shards of indigo and azure and aquamarine. Statues of the various gods of the realm stood stiffly in their niches as he passed, seeking the painted screen and what might lie behind it.

No sooner had he gone behind the screen and had begun to peer about in the dimness to find the carved stone, than he heard the tread of booted feet, the chink of spurs. The voice he heard was Pyr's, yet muted to a whisper. He smelled the rank scent of incense as Pyr lit one of the burners before a god image. Canthus had been about to leave his hiding place, but it didn't seem right somehow to interrupt prayers, and besides, he wanted to hear this, not having suspected that Pyr was so religious.

"Father Klemeth, chief among the gods when there is war in the land, he who has ever been almost a father—"

The image, when it spoke, spoke harshly as if out of a throat of bronze, but it spoke strongly as Canthus had not heard it speak before.

"Klemeth can no longer look upon a mortal as son or friend."

"You would have greeted me differently, once. Have I not served you well?"

"You have always served me, but there is one who wears the burningbright and makes war in the land of Bel Azhurra, giving us back our strength."

"A woman, a thief. Unworthy, yet you rode with her at Broughs Hill and at Bend-in-the-River to give her the victory."

"I would that the slut were trampled underfoot and that you wore the gem, almost-my-son, but nothing can now be changed."

"You will not help me. Are you not a god?" There was such a note of helplessness in the tone that Canthus found himself pitying Pyr.

"I *can* not." There was regret in the metallic voice.

"Then the world that was is no more. I will go against the gods themselves to destroy her." There was a rattle and the sound of departing footsteps.

Canthus found the stone and put his face very near to read it in the dimness. When he emerged, his mind full of the wonder of his discovery, he saw the bright image of Klemeth shattered on the stone floor. He hurried from the room lest the angered god strike out blindly.

Mists hung over Stone Dance Field, giving it an aura of strangeness, of impermanence, the great rough standing stones set immovable and ancient in their circular pattern. Jaquerel, astride the steel-grey war horse, looked back over her shoulder and saw the dark and ragged line of her advancing army. Here and there a standard fluttered in the wind, a fragile golden wisp of silk. Even in the damp chill of morning she felt herself enveloped in warmth and she urged the grey horse on, feeling a strange restlessness. At her side Falklin rode, silent, brooding no doubt on the wrongs Pyr had done him.

She was in the forefront as she saw the snakelike windings of the Warlord's defending army lying across the hillsides. She gave a passing thought to the folly of a general riding at the head of her troops, but she knew she wasn't altogether in control. Falklin and others had worked out the positions for this attack. She was only a standard they followed; who would not follow

How Jaquerel Made War In Bel Azhurra

that shining figure, lithe and golden into battle? A wisp of regret slipped through her mind, so fleeting that she could not even decide on the reason. Galloping through the mist she seemed to see other, taller riders loom to left and right. She thought she saw horned helmets, the set pieces of bronze faces, then the mists swirled back, cleared away, resolving the vision into riders of more mortal proportions. "It's nice," she thought, "to be on the side of the gods for a change," but her truer nature, half-buried asked, "Is it? Is it possible to be given so much with no payment exacted in return?"

The lines engaged, cavalry clashing and archers sending a swarm of arrows. Jaquerel's grey hammered its weight against a smaller, lighter beast and threw it off balance, tumbling the rider beneath the hoofs of other horses. Another warrior, in his reckless charge, practically impaled himself on her sword and almost dragged her down with him as he fell. Two others attacked simultaneously, one to a side, and she sawed the reins to send the grey back onto his hindlegs, so that the two adversaries nearly ran together. She slashed quickly at one, catching him across the face in a nasty but non-lethal wound and turned in the saddle to contend with the other whose swordpoint was bound toward a point between her shoulderblades. She slashed once bringing blood and drove in quickly where his leather chestplate ended. There were more attacks, defenses, and though she never tired physically, she felt a growing nausea at the drops of blood that spotted her clothing, at the sticky redness drooling off her blade. Then cavalymen and footsoldiers were running before her.

"We've broken through," shouted Falklin, raising his sword. "Drive them from the field."

From her position on the battlefield, it was not clear to Jaquerel for some time that they had won. As she rode back on the drooping grey, she passed through terrain that disclosed one by one, or clumped together, corpses of men

and horses—clenched teeth, open abdomens with viscera gleaming darkly, blood rivered and clotted in the dust, a hand helplessly curled as if in sleep, an equine neck stretched as if to win one last desperate race.

She had not thought ever to be clean or at rest or at peace again, but at evening she stood by her tent looking out over the fitfully gleaming fires of her camp. Having bathed in a stream, eaten a little, her own fire banked and rose-gold at her feet, she tried to turn her thoughts from death. Falklin fought his way through the clinging heartleaf to reach her tent. "We've beaten them soundly," he reported. "We'll harry them to the gates of the Warlord's Citadel."

She shrugged a little, the tent making a rippling sound as the wind caught it. "I tire of all this talk of battles. And the night grows chill . . . and lonely." She put her hand on his shoulder and its aura burned a little more fiercely. He must have felt the heat of it through his clothing, for he shuffled nervously.

"I came only to consult with you over the maps, to plan our next attack."

"You can think of nothing save maps and battle plans?" She looked at him directly.

"What of Whilder, and that red-bearded rascal you seemed to fancy—I forget his name?"

"You used to be better at plain talk. Can you not tell me straight out that you have no interest in me?" She stepped back a pace and her look was appraising, yet ever-so faintly amused. "Such a refusal would be unflattering," she continued with a wry smile. "But perhaps the power of the stone is greater than you imagine. Perhaps you will not be given the chance to refuse."

Falklin cleared his throat. "I think you toy with me."

"But you don't know."

"Your taste has run to younger, fairer men than myself."

How Jaquerel Made War In Bel Azhurra

"Perhaps my taste has changed." She broke the tension with a full-throated laugh. "You were right, but it was not an idle jest. You once thought to employ me, thoughtlessly, as one picks up a sword, in your personal war against Pyr. I thought you should see that the sword may have two edges. If I were still human, I could hate you . . . or love you."

Falklin seemed shaken. "Perhaps you could . . . take off the gem. It is only your power I fear."

"And be merely human in the midst of this tumult. No thank you. Let's study the maps. We have battle plans to make."

The voice of the old regent was as an unoiled hinge. "Canthus III would never have knuckled under to an upstart thief," he said and Canthus thought that it was in times like these that it was hardest to remain a man of peace. His fingers itched to throttle the old fool to silence. He wondered that Pyr hadn't done it long since. There was an air of desolation in the large, echoing rooms; many of the servants had fled. A catapult had knocked a gaping hole high in the wall of the throne room where he now stood. Sunlight came in, in one great splash.

He was startled as Pyr entered, cursing, his face black with ash and sweat. Canthus saw, even if Pyr didn't seem to notice, that a runnel of blood wound its way around his arm to drip off his fingertips. For the last few nights, as Canthus had roamed through the corridors, he had heard Pyr moaning and shouting, locked into some private nightmare. He had wondered vaguely what might be the content of those dreams, then had decided it might be best not to know.

"Though it is probably of no importance to you," said Pyr in a voice drained of all emotion. "They have breached the northern wall. We're done."

Canthus touched his half-brother's shoulder. Odd that always before he had considered him an obscene accident,

not a brother at all. Perhaps much of the hatred he had always felt was envy, that he could not be as Pyr was.

"Here, my sword."

"What?"

"Kill me now. With that damnable stone she's not human any more, if ever she was, and she has reason to hate me."

Canthus blinked at him, awed that the man would rather be dead than admit his own fear. There would have been a time when such an invitation as this would have been welcome, but for all his lessons in archery and swordsmanship, it was becoming pretty clear that killing another human being would never be a thing that came easily to him. He saw that he would never be as Pyr was, and for the first time dared to be glad of it.

"Like your father—coward!" taunted Pyr.

Armed men entered the room and Canthus knew that his domain had fallen. Somehow he didn't feel the loss of it. Jaquerel walked into the throne room, beside her a burly, rascally looking man with a patch over one eye. She was subtly different, having grown into her power, as it had grown into her. Canthus found that looking at her made his sight swim with golden discs. She threw off the heavy war cloak stained with smoke . . . and blood, and mounted to the throne. She pointed to Pyr. "Bring him before me."

Pyr struggled in the grip of the soldiers who held him, but he too had trouble in looking at the wearer of the burningbright. "Your tyranny is at an end," she said. "Now feel what it is to be in the hands of those more powerful than yourself." She waited for a response, but Pyr stubbornly said nothing. She looked up at her lieutenant. "Is it as you dreamed, Falklin?"

He nodded. "But it will be better when he is dead."

"I don't want him killed. For now, lock him away. I find that the gem I wear gives me a certain . . . vigor." She smiled sidelong at Falklin, sharing an old joke that was funnier

How Jaquere! Made War In Bel Azhurra

to her than to him.

When Pyr was dragged away, Canthus went to stand quietly at the foot of the throne. He knelt briefly, but there was thinly concealed amusement in his expression as he rose.

"What would you ask of me, little Warlord? To spare your life?"

"It is your life I would spare, my Lady."

She leaned forward angrily. "I was never yours."

"A figure of speech only." He was at once amazed and pleased with himself. He had always heard that knowledge was power, but he hadn't quite believed it until now. "Perhaps you would like to know that the burningbright has a secret—a well-guarded one. The energy you feel while wearing the gem is your own bodily force so much enhanced that you will literally burn yourself out in only a few years. You saw the ashes in the sarcophagus."

"So what if my years are short; they would be glorious," said the faintly coruscating figure on the throne, but he thought the part of her that was still human was shaken. There was a short, hard-fought struggle, none the less fierce Canthus thought, for being internal. Maybe that was where all the battles that mattered took place. Jaq's hands clutched convulsively on the armrests of the throne. "Take it off me," she said in a barely audible voice, as if she who spoke were distant, locked away somewhere out of sight. "I can't do it myself, but I can hold on while you do it." The air in the room became suddenly turbulent; Canthus heard the cadenced tread of bronze-shod feet, and far off, the brassy sound of a trumpet sounding the charge, an eerily seductive sound.

Canthus removed the fillet and the golden aura faded; the room regained its stone-walled reality; a pale and haggard-looking woman collapsed back on the throne.

"Surely you don't want it for yourself," she began through dry lips.

"No, I was willing to wear it before when the Regent called my father coward and when I didn't know of its effects. I'll have my scrolls moved to a monastery in the Upland Wastes, and there seek another kind of power."

He thought she laughed, or shuddered. "We all burn," she whispered.

"There is one problem," said Canthus. "How to dispose of Pyr. Unless we determine to kill him now, I'm afraid he'll take power again, after we've gone."

"I have a better idea. The guards will release him after we are safely gone, and in this room he will find both the burningbright and the location of its secret. The choice will be his."

"Cruel," said Canthus, "but somehow suitable." He helped her to rise and found her very light, as if she had been partly consumed by the powers that had driven her. "My Lady," he said, and when she denied it less violently this time, the thoughts that came into his mind made his face burn.

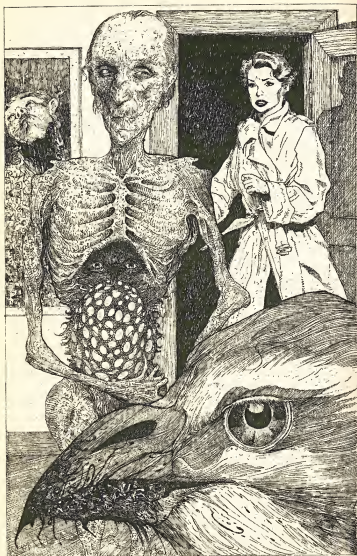
Shawn Ramsey

THE REVENANT

Composed of ashen cerements
And yellowed bones long-gnawed by ghouls,
The gaping blackness of its eyes
Reflect the depths of nightmare pools

Where shift its sins, unspeakable,
And memories as chill as space,
And wearing all its woes upon
The twisted ruin of its face,

It crept like fen-mist to my door
And wept, and tapped upon the pane—
But I just shook, and blamed the wind,
The thunder, and the driving rain.



*"But you are as dead as Julius Caesar, Jacob Marley and silent pictures."
(Art: Russ Nicholson)*

Kim Newman

MOTHER HEN

Kim Newman is becoming a regular contributor to Fantasy Tales. He is primarily a novelist and film critic, and in the UK he can be seen reviewing movies regularly on Channel 4 TV's Box Office show. He has written critical histories of the horror film (Nightmare Movies) and westerns (Wild West Movies) and contributed to The Virgin Film Yearbook, The Macmillan Encyclopedia of Film as well as the Aurum Film Encyclopedia series. He is the co-editor of the award-winning Horror: 100 Best Books and Ghastly Beyond Belief, and recent novels include The Night Mayor and Bad Dreams. As "Jack Yeovil" he has also written several gaming novelisations. "Mother Hen" again features Kim's offbeat private detective Sally Rhodes, who previously appeared in these pages last year in one of our most popular stories, "The Man Who Collected Barker".

1

When the client came, Sally was scraping her scruples off the door. She had left RHODES CONFIDENTIAL INVESTIGATIONS, but the NO DIVORCE WORK footnote was

going. She had lived with the Raymond Chandler Code of Chivalry for three years. And no thanks to an irregular procession of worried spinsters, she had never yet earned enough to make her accountant's elaborate tax avoidance schemes worth the effort.

The spinsters were uniformly faded. They had lost pets, or imagined prowlers, or wanted to trace long-ago school sweethearts. Recently, Sally had protected a tycoon's eminently kidnappable daughter during a weekend party. The girl had vomited *liebfraumilch*-flavoured porridge on her only decent dress, and Daddy still hadn't settled the expenses claim.

She would have been able to coast through the quarter; but she had run her Cortina through a red light and into a parked Porsche. The repairs, the insurance, and the fine had vacuum-cleaned both her bank accounts. At this stage in her career, Sally would welcome a nice, messy, protracted divorce commission.

The client, who had come unannounced and without an appointment, was a pot-bellied skeleton. He had a well-dressed, briefcase-carrying shadow with him.

"Ms Rhodes?" asked the client.

"It's miss," she said, silently biting off her instinctual "and proud of it, creepo!" What she said was: "Please go inside and get comfortable. I'll be with you in a sec."

The two men passed into her office. She brushed some gold dust off her skirt, and wrapped the gilt flakes in yesterday's *Guardian*. The sign read ORCE WORK, but she'd fix that later. Inside, she basketed the newspaper and sat in the wonky swivel chair. The room was tidy through inaction rather than inclination.

She had recently given up smoking for economic reasons, so she picked up a biro with which to gesture. "Gentlemen, how can I help?"

The opening question had been carefully calculated by the Murchison Agency, her former employer, to have the maximum tongue-loosening effect on the sort of people who needed confidential investigations. That is, people in trouble. The client wasn't having any of it. He remained as smooth and confident as anyone who looks as if he has been lying dead in a bath for three weeks possibly can.

"I am Nigel Karabatsos," he said. "I am rich."

"Congratulations."

"I mention the fact in order to establish a basis for our relationship, not out of any undue pride. I am rich through inheritance, and can thus claim no honour from my wealth. My great-grandfather invented the sticking plaster."

"I always wondered who'd done that."

Karabatsos twitched a smile. He cradled his waistcoated stomach like a pregnancy. Aside from that swelling, there was scarcely a pocket of flesh on him. It took no morbid turn of the imagination to see the skull beneath his skin.

Sally realised the shadow was looking at her legs, and sat up straight. She had already pegged Karabatsos as a fruitcake, but knew she would have to bear with him. There weren't all that many people willing to entrust their affairs to a private detective who looked more like Connie Francis than Alan Ladd.

"I want you to see something. Mr Derewicz." The shadow gave Karabatsos an expensive black case. With fingers like refrigerated sausages, Karabatsos opened the case and took out a cloth-wrapped bundle which he gave to Sally. "It's a statuette. Please examine it."

She unwound the faintly scented cloth, and held the cool dark marble thing in her bare hands. It was a black bird, with human legs, hair and breasts. It had ruby eyes and diamond talons. A golden shaft, slightly bent, pierced its torso, wedged immovably in the stone.

"Very pretty," she said, trying not to sound impressed. Actually, she felt an extraordinary desire to possess the statuette. As a child, she used to disconcert her parents whenever she saw a toy or sweet that took her fancy by shouting "I want it!"

"Yes," purred Karabatsos. "Of course, it's quite priceless. Nobody knows who made it, or when, where and why. The subject is classical, but there is something Germanic about the execution. Not exactly Gothic, but a chilly touch of the monasteries nevertheless . . ."

"What is it? An angel? A harpy? Foghorn Leghorn's sister?"

"There's a problem there. It first became known to history in 1520, when it was listed as one of the treasures of the Vatican. It is named as 'Mythwrhn', which sounds slightly Welsh. Don't try to pronounce it. The best you'll be able to do is 'Mother Hen'."

"Mother Hen?"

"That's it. Its passage around Europe becomes obscure until 1839, when an English adventurer named Fleetwood stole it from a minor Russian princeling. He was colourfully flogged to death by Cossacks, but the booty was smuggled into this country and came into the possession of his family. At about the turn of the century, it became a *kitsch* object much prized by certain mystic-minded crackpots. Edwin Arthur Waite swears in a memoir that the sight of the Mythwrhn sent him into a three-day fugue. W.B. Yeats, the poet, is believed to have written 'Leda and the Swan' in an attempt to exorcise the nightmares he suffered after examining the statuette . . ."

Sally resented being told who W.B. Yeats was. "There are a lot of crazies about," she interjected.

"As you say. Roger Fleetwood died recently. He had wanted to go into the Church like his father, but eventually

Mother Hen

decided instead to become a heroin addict. As Fleetwood's closest friend, I am executor of what remains of the estate. The Mythwrhn is a special bequest. It is to go to Roger's cousin, Joel Silliphant. Maybe you have heard of him. He once had some inexplicable success as a popular musician. I would like to see you deliver the statuette into his hands."

Sally stroked the marble feathers. The hole in the story was obvious. "I don't want to talk myself out of a commission, but wouldn't it be a lot simpler for you to give Silliphant his heirloom yourself?"

"There are problems," sighed Karabatsos. "I am afraid that Silliphant and I are not on civil terms. A dispute remains unsettled. The prospect of being in his company disgusts and appals me. At our last meeting, he attempted to bite off my lower lip . . ."

"He's a scratcher, Miss Rhodes," said Derewicz, touching white scars on his cheek. He had a Halifax accent.

"Do not be alarmed. Silliphant is not violent at random. He simply feels he has cause not to love Mr Derewicz and myself. You should be in no danger. Besides, someone in your profession must surely expect to run some risks. You are, I trust, competent in the arts of dirty fighting?"

"Oh yes, in California these hands would have to be licensed as deadly weapons. But potential violence costs extra."

"Would five hundred pounds cover your requirements?"

"Unless this Silliphant lives in Honolulu."

"As a matter of fact, he can be found in Camden. Mr Derewicz has all the details."

Sally was given a slim white envelope.

"There is a cheque inside," said Karabatsos. "Will you take the job?"

She was going to regret it, but . . .

"I don't see why not. I have a couple of other ongoing investigations, but nothing that can't wait. I should be able to deal with Mother Hen this evening."

"Excellent. Incidentally, I'd advise you against telephoning Silliphant to tell him you're coming. That would give him time to work up an irrational rage. There will be no need to inform me once you have discharged your duties. Good day."

Karabatsos stood up, steadied his wobbling stomach, and left. Before shutting the door behind him, Derewicz said "You know you look just like that girl who sang *Where the Boys Are*."

Sally gave him her zero degree smile. She shuddered as if her grave had been spat on. With an unnerving spasm of strength, she snapped the biro in two.

She could have sworn, for a moment, that Mother Hen had blinked.

2

Sally knew from experience and *The Rockford Files* that nothing was as simple as the commission she had accepted. She was being followed.

Although most of her backstreet scuffles had been with prodigal pussies, she was not unprepared for the occasional dangerous game of midnight hide-and-seek.

One of the imaginary plague of peeping toms in Highgate had turned out to be real. A borderline psychotic with a greasy quiff and a pair of boltcutters had found her watching him watching women in a garage toilet. He had dragged her into a petrol-stinking workshop, used the shears as a bludgeon, and tried to rape her. She had used the tool for a purpose related to that which it was intended for and neatly snipped off one of her assailant's nuts. He had got a sociology degree in Pentonville, and she had been bound over to keep the peace.

Mother Hen

There was an anonymous car tailing the 134 down the Archway Road. The bus stopped frequently, but the driver ignored all the opportunities to overtake it. Aside from the conductor, Sally shared the bus only with a pair of gibbering pensioners. The tail had to be on her.

The little Astra she sometimes carried for effect was locked up in a desk drawer back in Muswell Hill. Anyway, it didn't have a firing pin. If it came to physical violence, she thought she could hand out a fairly punitive whack with Mother Hen. Holding tightly the cloth-wrapped statuette, she got off a couple of stops early and dodged into a crowded kebab place.

The windows were misted over, but she discerned the blobby shape of the car as it drove by. She couldn't name the make but knew it was one of the common ones. Red tangles of dead cow turned over a weakly infernal light behind the counter. A loiterer with gorilla forearms and a "Feed the World" T-shirt tried accidentally to touch her bottom. She deliberately stamped on his sandals, and stepped cautiously onto the crud-covered pavement.

Over the road, a giant chicken with a red and green chef's hat clucked out special prices for its barbequed brothers in a Tennessee Williams accent.

The roar of a civil aircraft drowned the beating of Mother Hen's wings. Drops of red fell hundreds of feet to splash in the streets.

The anonymous address in Camden turned out to be a club, Fly-By-Nite's. The pursuit car was cruising around looking for an inconspicuous but convenient parking space. Karabatsos's northern polack was driving. He had on leather gloves and an SAS balaclava. Shit, thought Sally.

To get into Fly-by-Nite's, Sally had to squeeze through a dingy corridor beside a licensed sex shop, negotiate a rat-eaten bead curtain, and descend a creaky spiral staircase. The strains of that perennially popular heavy

punk standard "I Wanna Fuck a Pig" could be heard over the amp feedback. There was a heady whiff of drugs in the air.

She found herself in an overpoweringly loud environment, an economy-size cavern with wall-to-wall beefcake. The near-naked Conan clone on the door pointed to a sign: NO UNACCOMPANIED WOMEN. He had SUPER STEVE written on one of his pectorals. He mouthed a discreet "Naff off."

She stuffed a five pound note into his leather codpiece, not expecting any change. With a ball pen, she wrote on her hand: I'M A MAN IN DRAG. Super Steve wasn't satisfied, and put on an impressive display of brow-flexing. She smeared her palm clean on his oiled shoulder, and shouted "Where's Silliphant?"

Super Steve changed his attitude as promptly as a foreign waiter confronted with a television-advertised credit card. He signalled, and an understudy, smartly dressed as Robin the Boy Wonder, took his place as he led Sally through the flesh-jammed dance floor to a quieter room. Unsurprisingly, no one tried to touch her up.

"Would you mind waiting here?" asked Super Steve in a reassuringly Balham-shaded voice. "I'll fetch Joel."

"Thank you," she said. "By the way, a friend of mine will be coming in soon. He's a nice boy, just down from the North. He likes muscle guys."

"There's a lot of that about," he said, striking an Adonis pose that threatened to burst his black leather studded armlet. "I'll see he has a good time."

"I'm sure you will."

Left alone, Sally sat in a low chair covered in crinkly plastic. She rested Mother Hen on a glasstop table. The cloth slipped, and an elegant head poked out. She smiled at the statuette, cheered by its unruffled confidence.

Mother Hen

. . . As a little girl, Sally had liked *Superman* comics, and *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*, and Biggles, and pterodactyls, and *Dumbo*, and astronauts, and "Snoopy and the Red Baron", and zeppelins, and . . .

Her upper arms ached a little. She should have found a carrier bag for Mother Hen rather than clutching it like a baby. She stretched, and flapped her arms from the shoulders.

Silliphant walked into the room and she froze in a stupid position. It couldn't be anybody else. His longish black hair was thinning, and his kabuki makeup was inexpertly applied, but he still looked like the king and queen of rock 'n' roll, from his plastic horns down to his symbol-edged black robe.

He strutted in like a born performer, almost reaching for an invisible microphone. He turned to throw his combined sneer and pout at her, and caught sight of Mother Hen. He flew backwards and flattened against a wall as if tugged by a fishing line.

"Get that fucking bird out of here," he shrieked, his two-inch nails raking the furry wall, "or I'll have you fucking disembowelled here and now!"

She thought he was going to attack her, but Silliphant burned out like a flashbulb. His fury expired in an instant and he fell sobbing on the floor. He chewed the carpet and kicked the wall. His back arched. He could have been undergoing shock therapy.

In the cavern, the band segued into a thrash version of an old Beach Boys number. "She'll have fun, fun, fun, fun, fun, fun, fun, fun til her Daddy takes her T-bird away!"

Sally stood up, a little embarrassed. She pointed to Mother Hen. "I think this is yours," she said. Silliphant twisted on the floor and looked up at her. He had a snout moustache and tear-track scars in his white pancake. He was almost cried out.

"No," he whimpered. "I won't touch it. Karabatsos has no power over me. She can't have me. I repudiate the Thirteen."

Silliphant reached into a rubber plant and grabbed it by the stem, close to the pot. Waxy leaves writhed as he swung the heavy ceramic pot above his head. He hit the table, cracked the glass. The pot broke, clods of earth scattered.

Unsatisfied with the partial destruction, Silliphant threw himself onto the table, landing with all his weight. Chrome-plated tubes buckled, and the sheet glass exploded. Sally snatched Mother Hen out of the wreckage.

Silliphant grovelled in the earth and pottery and plant and glass until he found a jagged shard large enough to open his throat. He stopped screaming, and sawed roughly through his windpipe and a major artery.

His neck in ruins, he stood up. A Niagara of splatter fountained from beneath his jawline. He cried out almost triumphantly. Sally sidestepped and put a chair between herself and the dying man. She still got warm stains on her tights.

Silliphant fell into his mess and shut up. The pseudo-mouth in his neck kept gurgitating long after the rest of him had stopped kicking.

At last, glitter rock was dead.

3

Mother Hen crouched on a crumbling windowsill, talons sunk into the concrete, wings spread against red brick. She had been cheated of the prey ordained for her by the First Among Thirteen. The wound in her breast ached.

She remembered other red nights, and the statuette, and the Thirteen. Little else made sense. Her brain pan wasn't large enough for acute self-consciousness, but the fuzziness was clearing up. Her mind was still mostly mists, but a few pains and joys stood out as hard-edged tangibles.

Mother Hen

Her talons twitched. She needed the red stuff. The killing frenzy rose in her. She pushed herself forward and caught the prevailing wind. Flapping occasionally against the complex cross-currents, she glided silently downwards.

She could feel the pull of the shaft from the statuette.

4

The alley was badly lit and unpopulated. Sally easily found the car. Like everyone remotely connected with crime, Derewicz evidently considered himself immune to it. The car was unlocked, and the keys were in the starter. Sally squeezed into the back, and crouched on the floor.

Derewicz came back, bruised and pissed off. He had lost his balaclava. He had a gun, which made things serious.

He saw her a moment after he had tossed his weapon into the front passenger seat. He grabbed for it, but she tipped the seat savagely forward. The gun fell into the clutter of old cigarette packets and porno magazines under the dashboard.

She grabbed his wrist and tugged hard. He was pulled off balance, and banged his head heavily on the metal jamb. He swore unimaginatively at her. She threw herself back and kicked the driving seat with both feet. He was scrunched against the steering wheel.

Derewicz pulled out, and angrily hammered the roof. Sally scrabbled for the gun, but couldn't reach. She heard the click of a switchblade.

A gun and a knife. Evidently Karabatsos favoured belt and braces methods.

A murderous black duvet swooped out of the sky and fell on Derewicz. Sally saw him lifted out of her field of view. There was a sound like someone beating the dust out of a fleshy carpet; then the more identifiable noise of a man being turned inside-out.

Through the Panavision oblong of the window screen, Sally could see that it was raining entrails and scraps of expensive tailoring. She clambered awkwardly into the front seat, and shut the door. She strapped on the seatbelt, picked up the gun, and felt stupidly safe.

When dropped from even a moderate height on asphalt, the human body resembles nothing so much as a dustbin liner filled with watermelons. Derewicz thumped into the ground. In order to get out of the parking space, Sally would have to drive over him. She knew it would hardly make a difference.

She drove at random, scarcely aware of the red-eyed stone thing in the back seat. She found a packet of camels in the glove compartment and gave up giving up smoking. She felt tight inside, as she always did after witnessing unspeakable horror.

She turned on the radio and found a hippie show. The Holy Modal Rounders sang, "It don't take much to get you up there, but when you come down, you land on your fee-ee-ee-ee-eet!"

5

The license was in Karabatsos's name. His Swiss Cottage address was on the back of a crumpled envelope she found in the ashtray. So much for backbreaking detective work. She looked the street up in the car's tatty *A to Z*, and whiled away the short drive by thinking up the right hardboiled questions to ask.

It was an unobtrusively expensive house, a lot like all the others in sight but with obscene stained glass panels on either side of the front door.

The key was on Derewicz's ring, so she let herself in without making a fuss about it. The hallway was tastefully

Mother Hen

furnished with antiques in nice little niches. None of the pieces were as striking as Mother Hen.

Only one doorway off the hall showed a light. She opened it. The room was a study, and Karabatsos was in it.

He was stark naked, and lying in a circle of chalked symbols on the uncarpeted floor. His ribs looked like something from a Chinese take-away, and his scrawny shanks were tattooed with a delicate tracery of ideographs.

As before, his stomach was the most notable thing about his person. It was purple with unhealthy yellow mottles, and rippled as it shifted on the countless cilia which affixed it to his abdomen. Vestigial hands clutched well-worn ridges under Karabatsos's armpits. Beautiful, long-lashed eyes stared out of the mass, just below his sternum.

"Miss Rhodes," he said, not turning his head to her, "you've not met my wife."

He sat up carefully, cradling the flesh of his flesh, and pulled on a Sorcerer's Apprentice dressing gown. His schlong hadn't been anything to write home about.

"Joanna is quite ardent, I'm afraid. I pledged to give her my body, but I never thought it would come to this. Soon, I fear, I shan't have enough body left."

"Mother Hen . . ." She held out the statue.

"Pretty, isn't she?" He didn't seem all that interested. "I must say I'm surprised to see you. In her last killing frenzy, back in '68, she didn't stop until Henry Fleetwood put the retarding spell on her. He was the First Among Thirteen then, not that there were thirteen of us left. After the mess was cleared up there were only five: myself, Henry, my wife, Mr Derewicz and the odious Silliphant. My wife having long since disqualified herself from consideration as a human being, I suppose I am the only one. That rather devalues my position as the First, but never mind . . ."

"You're forgetting me, aren't you?"

Karabatsos decanted something red, and sipped it.

"No, my dear, of course not. You aren't easy to forget, believe me. It's just that you don't count. You've held on to the statuette long enough to catch whatever it is that upsets Mythwrhn so much. We never did quite work it out, but Fleetwood got the incantations down pat. You might have the temporary use of your limbs, Miss Rhodes, but you are as dead as Julius Caesar, Jacob Marley and silent pictures."

". . . and you?"

"Ah, I was careful. I am thrice protected. There was not a little pain involved, but the Mythwrhn cannot so much as touch me. It's not really magic, just transcendental arithmetic. It's quite fascinating once you get through the brand of patronising mumbo-jumbo the late Joel Silliphant was so keen on. Of course, you don't have time to make a thorough study of the subject . . ."

He poured a little liqueur into a slurping orifice between his wife's eyes.

"There there, Joanna. We'll be finished soon. Miss Rhodes, if you wouldn't mind leaving. My wife has had a tiring day."

"Why me, conjure man?" she asked. "How did I come into your game?"

"You have such a nice advertisement in the *Thompson Local Directory*. Now, I would appreciate not having to watch the Mythwrhn play with you . . ."

A rush of air blew the door behind Sally open. Mother Hen crowded into the hall.

"Oh well, I suppose my stomach can stand it. Try not to scream too much. The neighbours are liable to complain."

Mother Hen brushed walls with her wings, uncomfortable without a sky above her. She brushed a heavy bronze mask to the floor, and closed her talons about the heavy metal, crushing it like a coke can. Her wound bled a little.

Mother Hen

She drew her wings in and crouched as she came into the study. Once in the spacious room, she stretched. Sally saw the shifting, multi-coloured highlights in her superficially black feathers. Her flat stomach gleamed with honeyed perspiration. She was terribly beautiful.

"She doesn't want to kill you," said Karabatsos. "She wants to kill me. But, just now, she can't. We all have to obey laws. Obviously, my tattoos were worth the momentary discomfort. She has a very presentable bum, don't you think?"

Sally backed away. Mother Hen towered over Karabatsos, clacking her beak with rage. She turned her head on a swan neck and looked at Sally with kindly eyes.

Sally realised that she had left Derewicz's gun in the car, but assumed that it wouldn't have made much difference.

Karabatsos tried to look nonchalant, but his hands were quivering in voluminous sleeves. Mrs Karabatsos was chirruping something.

Mother Hen draped her wings around Karabatsos and hugged him. She dipped her head to his stomach, and gripped the squealing jelly with her razor-edged beak. Blue mucus sloshed loudly on herringbone tiles.

Karabatsos screamed like a man being partially castrated with a pair of boltcutters. He realised too late how close he was to his wife, and that he should have protected her too.

Mother Hen shook her head, and Karabatsos flew into a wall-sized bookcase. Delicately, she dropped the wriggling wife. The thing that had loved Nigel Karabatsos rolled like an upended louse. Its tubes waved feebly as it shrivelled and died.

Karabatsos leaked into a pile of broken-backed books. From nipples to pubes, he was an open wound. The neatly punctured bowels flopped loosely between his legs. He gulped deep breaths, but his lungs were as functional as a pair of ruptured balloons.

He had nothing courteous or acidic or witty or waspish to say as his contents spilled.

Sally looked at the feathered murderess, and could find no disgust for such a magnificent creature. The assassin tucked her head under her wing, and scratched feebly at her sundered breast. Sally knew what she had to do.

She took the statuette, and got a firm grip on the golden arrow. The shaft came free as smoothly as the sword-in-the-stone for the once and future king. Sally easily snapped the impertinent needle in two.

Unbloodied, Mother Hen stretched her wings and shattered the French windows. A light rain blew in from the walled garden. Her wound irised shut, leaving a negligible scar. She was no longer bound. She sang gently.

Sally was wrapped up in Mother Hen's feathery embrace. She closed her eyes and felt the great heart beating close by her ear. Her body thrilled as she was swept off her feet.

"Up, up, and away," she whispered.

Thomas Ligotti

THE SPECTACLES IN THE DRAWER

Thomas Ligotti lives in Michigan and worked initially in the small press field, startling readers with his unique and oblique approach to horror fiction. His bizarre tales have been published in, amongst others, Grue , Nyctalops, Dark Horizons and, of course, Fantasy Tales, where his story "The Frolic" was voted best in the issue. It was later reprinted in our showcase anthology Best Horror from Fantasy Tales. More recently his work has appeared in such anthologies as Douglas Winter's Prime Evil, Ramsey Campbell's Fine Frights, and Best New Horror, as well as the magazines Fantasy & Science Fiction and Weird Tales. In 1985 the Silver Scarab Press published a short story collection in a limited edition, Songs of a Dead Dreamer, which has been described as one of the most important horror books of the decade. This acclaimed collection is now available in a revised mass-market edition from Robinson Publishing/Carroll & Graf.

Last year at this time, perhaps on this very day, Plomb visited me at my home. He always seemed to know when I had returned from my habitual travelling and always appeared uninvited on my doorstep. Although this former residence of mine was pathetically run-down, Plomb seemed to regard it as a kind of castle or fortress, always gazing up at its high ceilings as if he were witnessing its wonders for the first time. That day—a dim one, I think—he did not fail to do the same. Then we settled into one of the spacious though sparsely furnished rooms of my house.

“And how were your travels?” he asked, as if only in the spirit of polite conversation. I could see by his smile—an emulation of my own, no doubt—that he was glad to be back in my house and in my company. I smiled too and stood up. Plomb, of course, stood up along with me, almost simultaneously with my own movements.

“Shall we go then?” I said. *What a pest*, I thought.

Our footsteps tapped a moderate time on the hard wooden floor leading to the stairway. We ascended to the second floor, which I left almost entirely empty, and then up a narrower stairway to the smaller, nearly windowless third floor. At the end of the hall there was a small wooden stairway, no more than a ladder, that led to an old storeroom where I kept certain things which I collected. Although I had brought him to this room several times before, I still could see from his wandering eyes that, for him, every tendrilled swirl of the wallpaper, every cobweb fluttering in the corners above, every stale draft of that attic aerie composed a suspenseful prelude to our entrance of the old storeroom.

It was not by any means a spacious room, and its enclosed atmosphere was *thickened*, as Plomb would have emphasized, by its claustrophobic arrangement of tall cabinets, ceiling-high



"I am back from my trip." (Art: Dave Carson)

shelves, and various trunks and crates. This is simply how things worked out over a period of time. And, in any case, Plomb seemed to favour this state of affairs. "Ah, the room of secret mystery," he said. "Where all your treasures are kept, all the raw wonders cached away."

These treasures and wonders, as Plomb called them, were, I suppose, remarkable from a certain point of view. Plomb loved to go through all the old objects and articles, gathering together a lapful of curios and settling down on the dusty sofa at the centre of this room. But it was the new items, whenever I returned from one of my protracted tours, that always took precedence in Plomb's hierarchy of wonders. Thus, I immediately brought out the double-handled dagger with the single blade of polished stone. At first sight of the ceremonial object, Plomb held out the flat palms of his hands, and I placed this exotic device upon its rightful altar. "Who could have made such a thing?" he asked, though rhetorically. He expected no answer to his questions and possibly did not really desire any. And of course I offered no more elaborate an explanation than a simple smile. But how quickly, I noticed, the magic of that first fragment of "speechless wonder", as he would say, lost its initial surge of fascination. How fast that glistening fog, which surrounded only him, dispersed to unveil a tedious clarity. I had to move faster.

"Here," I said, my arm searching the shadows of an open wardrobe. "This should be worn when you handle that sacrificial artifact." And I threw the robe about his shoulders, engulfing his smallish frame with a cyclone of strange patterns and colours. He admired himself in the mirror attached inside the door of the wardrobe. "Look at the robe in the mirror," he practically shouted. "The weird designs are all turned around. How much stranger, how much better." While he stood there glaring at himself, I relieved him of the dagger before he had a chance to do something careless. This left his hands free to

raise themselves up to the dust-caked ceiling of the room, and to the dark gods of his imagination. Gripping each handle of the dagger, I suddenly elevated it above his head, where I held it poised. In a few moments he started to giggle, then fell into spasms of sardonic hilarity. He stumbled over to the old sofa and collapsed upon its soft cushions. I followed, but when I reached his prostrate form it was not the pale-blue blade that I brought down upon his chest—it was simply a book, one of many I had put before him. His peaked legs created a podium on which he rested the huge volume, propping it securely as he began turning the stiff, crackling pages. The sound seemed to absorb him as much as the sight of a language he could not even name let alone comprehend.

"The lost grimoire of the Abbot of Tine," he giggled. "Transcribed in the language of—"

"A wild guess," I interjected. "And a wrong one."

"Then the forbidden *Psalms of the Silent*. The book without an author."

"Without a *living* author, if you will recall what I told you about it. But you're very wide of the mark."

"Well, suppose you give me a hint," he said with an impatience that surprised me. "Suppose—"

"But wouldn't you prefer to guess at its wonders, Plomb?" I suggested encouragingly. Some moments of precarious silence passed.

"I suppose I would," he finally answered, and to my relief. Then I watched him gorge his eyes on the inscrutable script of the ancient volume.

In truth, the mysteries of this Sacred Writ were among the most genuine of their kind, for it had never been my intention to dupe my disciple—as he justly thought of himself—with false secrets. But the secrets of such a book are not absolute: once they are known, they become relegated to a lesser sphere, which is that of the knower. Having lost the prestige

they once enjoyed, these former secrets now function as tools in the excavation of still deeper ones which, in turn, will suffer the same corrosive fate. And this is the fate of all true secrets. Eventually the seeker may conclude—either through insight or sheer exhaustion—that this ruthless process is never-ending, that the mortification of one mystery after another, in fact, has no conclusion beyond that of the seeker's own extinction. And how many still remain susceptible to the search? How many pursue it to the end of their days with undying hope of some ultimate revelation? Better not to think in precise terms just how few the faithful are. More to the present point, it seems that Plomb was one of their infinitesimal number. And it was my intention to reduce that number by one.

The plan was simple: to feed Plomb's hunger for mysterious sensations to the point of nausea . . . and beyond. The only thing to survive would be a gutful of shame and regret for a defunct passion.

As Plomb lay upon the sofa, ogling that stupid book, I moved toward a large cabinet whose several doors were composed of a tarnished metal grillwork framed by darkest wood. I opened one of these doors and exposed a number of shelves cluttered with books and odd objects. Upon one shelf, resting there as sole occupant, was a very white box. And it was no larger, as I mentally envision it, than a modest jewellery case. There were no markings on the box, except the fingerprints, or rather thumbprints, smearing its smooth white surface at its opposing edges and halfway along its length. There were no handles or embellishments of any kind; not even, at first sight, the thinnest of seams to indicate the level at which the lower part of the box met the upper part, or perhaps give away the existence of a drawer. I smiled a little at the mock intrigue of the object, then gripped it from either side, gently, and placed my thumbs precisely over the

The Spectacles In The Drawer

fresh thumbprints. I applied pressure with each thumb, and a shallow drawer popped open at the front of the box. As hoped, Plomb had been watching me as I went through these meaningless motions.

"What do you have there?" he asked.

"Patience, Plomb. You will see," I answered while delicately removing two sparkling items from the drawer: one a small and silvery knife which very much resembled a razor-sharp letter opener, and the other a pair of old-fashioned wire-rimmed spectacles.

Plomb laid aside the now-boring book and sat up straight against the arm of the sofa. I sat down beside him and opened up the spectacles so that the stems were pointing towards his face. When he leaned forward, I slipped them on. "They're only plain glass," he said with a definite tone of disappointment. "Or a very weak prescription." His eyes rolled about as he attempted to scrutinize what rested upon his own face. Without saying a word, I held up the little knife in front of him until he finally took notice of it. "Ahhhh," he said, smiling. "There's more to it."

"Of course there is," I said, gently twirling the steely blade before his fascinated eyes. "Now hold out your palm, just like that. Good, good. You won't even feel this, completely harmless. Now," I instructed him, "keep watching that tiny red trickle.

"Your eyes are now fused with those fantastic lenses, and your sight is one with its object. And what exactly is that object? Obviously it is everything that fascinates, everything that has power over your gaze and your dreams. You cannot even conceive the wish to look away. And even if there are no simple images to see, nonetheless there is a vision of some kind, an infinite and overwhelming scene expanding before you. And the vastness of this scene is such that even the dazzling diffusion of all the known universes

cannot convey its wonder. Everything is so brilliant, so great, and so alive: landscapes without end that are running with life, landscapes that are themselves alive. Unimaginable diversity of form and motion, design and dimension. And each detail is perfectly crystalline, from the mammoth shapes lurching in outline against endless horizons to the minutest cilia wriggling in an obscure oceanic niche. Even this is only a mere fragment of all that there is to see and to know. There are labyrinthine astronomies, discrete systems of living mass which yet are woven together by a complex of intersections, at points mingling in a way that mutually affects those systems involved, yielding instantaneous evolutions, constant transformations of both appearance and essence. You are witness to all that exists or ever could exist. And yet, somehow concealed in the shadows of all that you can see is something that is not yet visible, something that is beating like a thunderous pulse and promises still greater visions: all else is merely its membrane enclosing the ultimate thing waiting to be born, preparing for the cataclysm which will be both the beginning and the end. To behold the prelude to this event must be an experience of all-encompassing and unbearable anticipation, so that hope and dread merge into a new emotion, one corresponding perfectly to the absolute and the wholly unknown. The next instant, it seems, will bring with it a revolution of all matter and energy. But the seconds keep passing, the experience grows more fascinating without fulfilling its portents, without extinguishing itself in revelation. And although the visions remain active inside you, deep in your blood—you now awake."

Pushing himself up from the sofa, Plomb staggered forward a few steps and wiped his bloodied palm on the front of his shirt, as if to wipe away the visions. He shook his head vigorously once or twice, but the spectacles remained secure.

The Spectacles In The Drawer

"Is everything all right?" I asked him.

Plomb appeared to be dazzled in the worst way. Behind the spectacles his eyes gazed dumbly, and his mouth gaped with countless unspoken words. However, when I said, "Perhaps I should remove these for you," his hand rose toward mine, as if to prevent me from doing so. But his effort was half-hearted. Folding their wire stems one across the other, I replaced them back in their box. Plomb now watched me, as if I were performing some ritual of great fascination. He seemed to be still composing himself from the experience.

"Well?" I asked.

"Dreadful," he answered. "But . . ."

"But?"

"But I . . ."

"You?"

"What I mean is—where did they come from?"

"Can't you imagine that for yourself?" I countered. And for a moment it seemed that in this case, too, he desired some simple answer, contrary to his most hardened habits. Then he smiled rather deviously and threw himself down upon the sofa. His eyes glazed over as he fabricated an anecdote to his fancy.

"I can see you," he said, "at an occultist auction in a disreputable quarter of a foreign city. The box is carried forward, the spectacles taken out. They were made several generations ago by a man who was at once a student of the Gnostics and a master of optometry. His ambition: to construct a pair of artificial eyes that would allow him to bypass the obstacle of physical appearances and glimpse a far-off realm of secret truth, whose gateway is within the depths of our own blood."

"Remarkable," I replied. "Your speculation is so close to truth itself that the details are not worth mentioning for the mere sake of vulgar correctness."

In fact, the spectacles belonged to a lot of antiquarian rubbish I once bought blindly, and the box was of unknown, or rather unremembered, origin—just something I had lying around in my attic room. And the knife, a magician's prop for efficiently slicing up paper money and silk ties.

I carried the box containing both spectacles and knife over to Plomb, holding it slightly beyond his reach. I said, "Can you imagine the dangers involved, the possible nightmare of possessing such 'artificial eyes'?" He nodded gravely in agreement. "And you can imagine the restraint the possessor of such a gruesome artifact must practice." His eyes were all comprehension, and he was sucking a little at his slightly lacerated palm. "Then nothing would please me more than to pass the ownership of this obscure miracle on to you, my dear Plomb. I'm sure you will hold it in wonder as no one else could."

And it was exactly this wonder that it was my malicious aim to undermine, or rather to expand until it ripped itself apart. For I could no longer endure the sight of it.

As Plomb once again stood at the door of my home, holding his precious gift with a child's awkward embrace, I could not resist asking him the question. Opening the door for him, I said, "By the way, Plomb, have you ever been hypnotized?"

"I . . ." he answered.

"You," I prompted.

"No," he said. "Why do you ask?"

"Curiosity," I replied. "You know how I am. Well, good-night, Plomb."

And I closed the door behind the most willing subject in the world, hoping it would be some time before he returned. "If ever," I said aloud, and the words echoed in the hollows of my home.

But it was not long afterward that Plomb and I had our next confrontation, though the circumstances were odd and accidental. Late one afternoon, as it happens, I was browsing through a shop that dealt in second-hand merchandise of the most pathetic sort. The place was littered with rusty scales that would have once given your weight for a penny, cock-eyed bookcases, dead toys, furniture without style or substance, grotesque standing ashtrays late of some hotel lobby, and a hodge-podge of old-fashioned fixtures. For me, however, such decrepit bazaars offered more diversion and consolation than the most exotic marketplaces, which so often made good on their strange promises that mystery itself ceased to have meaning. But my second-hand seller made no promises and inspired no dreams, leaving all that to those more ambitious hucksters who trafficked in such perishable stock in trade. At the time I could ask no more of a given grey afternoon than to find myself in one of these enchantingly desolate establishments.

That particular afternoon in the second-hand shop brought me a brief glimpse of Plomb in a second-hand manner. The visual transaction took place in a mirror that leaned against a mattress that leaned against a wall, one of the many mirrors that seemed to constitute a specialty of the shop. I had squatted down before this rectangular relic, whose frame reminded me of the decorated borders of old books, and wiped my bare hand across its dusty surface. And there, hidden beneath the dust, was the face of Plomb, who must have just entered the shop and was standing a room's length away. While he seemed to recognize immediately the reverse side of me, his expression betrayed the hope that I had not seen him. There was shock as well as shame upon that face, and something else besides. And if Plomb had approached

me, what could I have said to him? Perhaps I would have mentioned that he did not look very well or that it appeared he had been the victim of an accident. But how could he explain what had happened to him except to reveal the truth that we both knew and neither would speak? Fortunately, this scene was to remain in its hypothetical state, because a moment later Plomb was out the door.

I cautiously approached the front window of the shop in time to see Plomb hurrying off into the dull, unreflecting day, his right hand held up to his face. "It was only my intention to cure him," I mumbled to myself. I had not considered that he was incurable, nor that things would have developed in the way they did.

3

And after that day I wondered, eventually to the point of obsession, what kind of hell had claimed poor Plomb for its own. I knew only that I had provided him with a type of toy: the subliminal ability to feast his eyes on an imaginary universe in a rivulet of his own blood. The possibility that he would desire to magnify this experience, or indeed that he would be capable of such a feat, had not seriously occurred to me. Obviously, however, this had become the case. I now had to ask myself how much farther could Plomb's situation be extended. The answer, though I could not guess it at the time, was presented to me in my dreams.

And it seemed fitting that the dream had its setting in the attic room of my house, which Plomb once prized above all other rooms in the world. I was sitting in a chair, a huge and enveloping chair which in reality does not exist but in the dream directly faced the huge and enveloping sofa. No thoughts or feelings troubled me, and I had only the faintest sense that someone else was in the room. But I could not see

who it was, because everything appeared so dim in outline, blurry and greyish. There seemed to be some movement in the region of the sofa, as if the enormous cushions themselves had become lethargically restless. Unable to fathom the source of this movement, I touched my hand to my temple in thought. This was how I discovered that I was wearing a pair of spectacles with thick lenses and very fragile rims connected to wiry stems. I thought to myself: "If I remove these spectacles I will be able to see more clearly." But then a voice told me not to remove them, and I recognized that voice. "Plomb," I said. And then something moved, like a man-shaped shadow, upon the sofa. A climate of dull horror began to invade my surroundings. "Even if your trip is over," I said deliriously, "you have nothing to show for it." But the voice disagreed with me in sinister whispers that made no sense but seemed filled with meaning. I would indeed be shown things, these whispers might have said. Already I was being shown things, astonishing things—mysteries and marvels beyond anything I had ever suspected. And suddenly all my feelings, as I gazed through the spectacles, were proof of that garbled pronouncement. They were feelings of a peculiar nature which, to my knowledge, one experiences only in dreams: sensations of infinite expansiveness and ineffable meaning that have no place elsewhere in our lives. But although these monstrous, astronomical emotions suggested wonders of incredible magnitude and character, I saw nothing through those magic lenses except this: the obscure shape in the shadows before me as its outline grew clearer and clearer to my eyes. Gradually I came to view what appeared to be a mutilated carcass, something of a terrible rawness, a torn and flayed thing whose every laceration could be traced in crystalline sharpness. The only thing of colour in my greyish surroundings, it twitched and quivered like a gory heart exposed beneath the body of the dream. And it made a

sound like hellish giggling. Then it said: "I am back from my trip," in a horrible, piercing voice.

It was this simple statement that inspired my efforts to tear the spectacles from my face, even though they now seemed to be part of my flesh. I gripped them with both hands and flung them against the wall, where they shattered. Somehow this served to exorcise my tormented companion, who faded back into the greyness. Then I looked at the wall and saw that it was running red where the spectacles had struck. And the broken lenses that lay upon the floor were bleeding.

To experience such a dream as this on a single occasion might very well be the stuff of a haunting, lifelong memory, something that perhaps might even be cherished for its unfathomable depths of feeling. But to suffer over and over this same nightmare, as I soon found was my fate, leads one to seek nothing so much as a cure to kill the dream, to reveal all its secrets and thus bring about a selective amnesia.

At first I looked to the sheltering shadows of my home for deliverance and forgetfulness, the sobering shadows which at other times had granted me a cold and stagnant peace. I tried to argue myself free of my nightly excursions, to discourse these visions away, lecturing the walls *contra* the prodigies of a mysterious world. "Since any form of existence," I muttered, "since any form of existence is by definition a conflict of forces, or it is nothing at all, what can it possibly matter if these skirmishes take place in a world of marvels or one of mud? The difference between the two is not worth mentioning, or none. Such distinctions are the work of only the crudest and most limited perspectives, the sense of mystery and wonder foremost among them. Even the most esoteric ecstasy, when it comes down to it, requires the prop of vulgar pain in order to stand up as an experience. Having acknowledged the truth, however provisional, and the reality, if subject to mutation, of all the

The Spectacles In The Drawer

strange things in the universe—whether known, unknown, or merely suspected—one is left with no recourse than to conclude that none of them makes any difference, that such marvels change nothing: our experience remains *the same*. The gallery of human sensations that existed in prehistory is identical to the one that faces each life today, that will continue to face each new life as it enters this world . . . and then looks beyond it."

And thus I attempted to reason my way back to self-possession. But no measure of my former serenity was forthcoming. On the contrary, my days as well as my nights were now poisoned by an obsession with Plomb. Why had I given him those spectacles! More to the point, why did I allow him to retain them? It was time to take back my gift, to confiscate those little bits of glass and twisted metal that were now harrowing the wrong mind. And since I had succeeded too well in keeping him away from my door, then I would have to be the one to approach his.

4

But it was not Plomb who answered the rotting door of the house, the one which stood at the end of the street and beside a broad expanse of empty field. It was not Plomb who asked if I was a newspaper journalist or a policeman before closing that gouged and filthy door in my face when I replied that I was neither of those persons. Pounding on that wobbling door, which seemed about to crumble under my fist, I summoned the sunken-eyed man a second time to ask if this in fact was Mr Plomb's address. I had never visited him at his home, that hopeless little box in which he lived and slept and dreamed.

"Was he a relative?"

"No," I answered.

"A friend. You're not here to collect a bill, because if that's the case . . ."

For the sake of simplicity I interjected that, yes, I was a friend of Mr Plomb.

"Then how is it you don't know?"

For the sake of my curiosity I said that I had been away on a trip, as I often was, and had my own reasons for notifying Mr Plomb of my return.

"Then you don't know anything," he stated flatly.

"Exactly," I replied.

"It was even in the newspaper. And they asked me about him."

"Plomb," I confirmed.

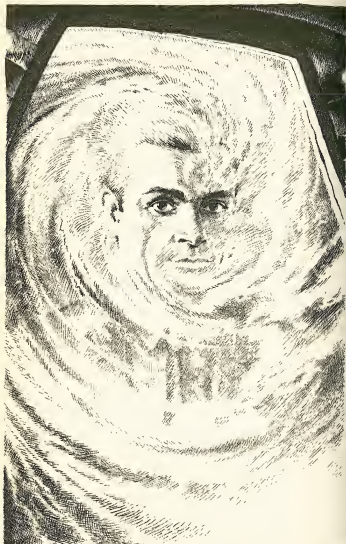
"That's right," he said, as if he had suddenly become the custodian of a secret knowledge.

Then he waved me into the house and led me through its ugly, airless interior to a small storage room at the back. He reached along the wall inside the room, as if he wanted to avoid entering it, and switched on the light. And immediately I understood why the hollow-faced man preferred not to go into that room, for Plomb had renovated that tiny space in a very strange way. Each wall, as well as the ceiling and floor, was a mosaic of mirrors, a shocking galaxy of redundant reflections. And each mirror was splattered with sinister droplets, as if someone had swung several brushfuls of paint from various points throughout the room, spreading dark stars across a silvery firmament. In his attempt to exhaust or exaggerate the visions to which he had apparently become enslaved, Plomb had done nothing less than multiply these visions into infinity, creating oceans of his own blood and enabling himself to see with countless eyes. Entranced by such aspiration, I gazed at the mirrors in speechless wonder. Among them was one I remembered looking into some days—or was it weeks?—before.

The Spectacles In The Drawer

The landlord, who did not follow me into the room, said something about suicide and a body ripped raw. This news was of course unnecessary, even boring. But I was overwhelmed at Plomb's ingenuity: it was some time before I could look away from that gallery of glass and gore. Only afterward did I fully realize that I would never be rid of the horrible Plomb. He had broken through all the mirrors, projected himself into the eternity beyond them.

And even when I abandoned my home, with its hideous attic room, Plomb still followed me in my dreams. He now travels with me to the ends of the earth, initiating me night after night into his unspeakable wonders. I can only hope that we will not meet in another place, one where the mysteries are always new and dreams never end. Oh, Plomb, will you not stay in that box where they have put your riven body?



The disassembled molecular components of his body filled the HMD's collection chamber. (Art: Martin McKenna)

Marvin Kaye

HAPPY HOUR

Marvin Kaye lives in New York and is an all-rounder in the creative field: author, actor, lecturer, public speaker, singer, playwright, editor and columnist! As a writer, he has been published in a number of countries and his whodunits include the popular "Hilary Quayle" and "Marty Gold" series. In the fantasy field he has edited such successful anthologies as Ghosts, Devils and Demons, Witches and Warlocks, Weird Tales—The Magazine That Never Dies, Haunted America and, upcoming, Lovers and Other Monsters. His short fiction has appeared in Amazing Stories, Fantastic, Weird Tales and The Year's Best Fantasy Stories, amongst others. He has published some ten novels, including the humorous science-fantasy "Umbrella" series: The Incredible Umbrella, The Amorous Umbrella and The Nautical Umbrella (forthcoming). He has written two science fiction novels in collaboration with Parke Godwin, The Masters of Solitude and Wintermind, and also a bestselling horror novel from the same team, A Cold Blue Light. The author's latest novel in progress, Fantastique, is a fantasy inspired by Berlioz's Symphonie Fantastique. The following SF story marks Marvin's debut in Fantasy Tales.

On the afternoon that Lionel B. Horace returned home to an empty apartment for the thirty-eighth time, he put on a bright pink shirt, scarlet tie, blood-red leather leisure suit, contact lenses with crimson irises and a carrot-coloured toupee. He shoehorned his feet into brick-orange polished pumps with plaid laces and splashed cinnamon essence on his cheeks, then, facing his bedroom mirror and sticking his tongue out at his fiery reflection, he said, "Mister Horace, you are a short fat ugly wimp, but now at least you are a short fat ugly *interesting* wimp."

As he hurried to the front door, he tried not to glance at the table in the entry alcove, but for the thirty-eighth time the corner of one of his (currently) Hell-hued eyes noticed the crumpled scrap of paper tossed upon the tabletop and for a few seconds he could not move. But it was almost 1800 hours and after some five anxious weeks of waiting for the A. P. to arrange his clearance, Lionel was damned if he'd miss one single mad moment of Happy Hour, so, squeezing his lids shut and twisting the knob hard enough to strangle it, Lionel plunged through the portal with a ragged sigh of relief, slammed the door and waddled into the nearest Flygate, which instantly redistributed him just outside Sound Stage A.

TIME: Thirty-four days earlier.

PLACE: Sound Stage A.

An actor rises from an armchair and as he does, his head goes completely out of frame. In the control booth, Vincent Michaels, the associate producer, punches another camera on-line and speaks into his microphone, "Tilt up, Lonny, damn it! *Tilt!* You're cutting him off at the neck!"

In the studio, Lionel B. Horace, C. S. C.*, guiltily readjusts

*Member, Cosmic Society of Camerapersons

Happy Hour

till his actor's face is again centered onscreen. "Retake, Vinnie?" he mutters nervously.

"No," says the A. P.'s voice in his headset, "we'll go with it, but be in my office ten minutes after wrap."

TIME: Ten minutes after wrap.

PLACE: The office of the associate producer of *Los Angeles Ladies*, Number # 1 show in the New Earth Network's daytime ratings.

Vincent R. Michaels, twenty-year veteran of interstellar soap opera production, is a legend in a business where job security is figured in six-month increments (the interval between supply-transport shuttles to and from Network Nova). Opinions in the TV industry vary as to the secret of his staying power—

"Fay Farrah-Webber, *Los Angeles Ladies*' Executive Producer commented, 'If I say Vinnie is remarkably unambitious, it sounds like he's lazy, which he certainly is *not*. I mean that he isn't the least bit interested in climbing the corporate ladder—the network offered him my job and he declined—he's content to be exactly where he is, coordinating the show.'

"But an anonymous source voiced a different opinion: 'Don't be fooled by Vinnie's butter-won't-melt act. He is *the* man at *L.A. Ladies* and any camera director who ignores one of Vinnie's "suggestions" will find her or himself riding the next shuttle off Nova.'

"As for Michaels himself, he claims to be as dedicated to *Los Angeles Ladies* as a parish priest upholding vows of poverty and chastity. 'There is no more Los Angeles and no more California,' he said. 'It's my job to help people remember Wonderland.'"

Thirty-four days before Happy Hour, in Vincent Michaels' office, Lionel B. Horace vows not to commit any more

*Cosmic Starshine, "The Man Behind L.A. Ladies" (10/2/89)

mistakes.

"Lonny, how long have you been with us?"

"Two years, Vinnie."

"So you've seen a lot of staff turnover."

Lionel shifts uncomfortably in his black leatherette chair.

"Uh-huh. Every six months."

"You're aware of unemployment statistics in your union. Yet you've goofed half-a-dozen times in the past four days."

"Then I'm history?"

Michaels sighs. "Until this week, you were my best cameraperson. I'd rather not lose you. What's wrong? Maybe I can fix it."

"The shuttle last week . . . Marie was on it."

Even as the A. P.s' eyebrows rise, his fingers run an arpeggio on his computer keyboard, punching up the recent shuttle's passenger list. He scans the readout, clears the screen and smiles encouragingly at his employee. "You're wrong, Lonny. She's still here on Network Nova."

"She is?" The other leaps to his feet. "Where is she?"

"I don't know, but she wasn't on the shuttle. Now if you promise to concentrate on your work, I promise I'll find her for you."

Lionel's face falls. "Even if she is still here, she won't have anything more to do with me."

"Certainly not if you take that attitude. Lonny, you've got to think positive. Start feeling good about yourself—"

"How can I? I'm a short fat ugly wimp."

The A.P. punches more keyboard buttons. "Lonny, how old are you?"

"Forty-four. Why?"

"Blood type?"

"B Positive."

"Childhood diseases?"

"The usual. Waxeritis. Trottertoe. A cold."

Happy Hour

"Any hereditary disease tendencies?"

"Diabetes. Vinnie, what *are* you doing?"

Pressing Return, the A.P. pats Lionel's shoulder. "My friend, we're going to work on your CQ."

"CQ?"

"Your confidence quotient. On one condition . . . everything I'm about to tell you is top secret."

Mystified but interested, Lionel nods. And Vincent Michaels unfolds to his increasingly eager ears the forbidden wonders of Happy Hour.

TIME: Thirty-four days later; 17:53 hours.

PLACE: An antechamber off Sound Stage A.

Vinnie hadn't exaggerated. Lionel's bartender looked like all the blondes he'd ever wanted.

"Ha-ahh, mah name is Tina," she drawled in the southern accent that many Network Nova citizens affected in imitation of Lydia Winston, the popular *Los Angeles Ladies* actress who played Deena Lou Macon, "the southern-fried starlet from Georgia" (in the lingo of the press releases).

"Ahm youah bahtendah," Tina said. "Aah'll see thatch'git anythin' youah sweet li'l haht desa-ahs." She flashed white-cornkernel teeth, then pretended to pout. "But if'n I doan' appeal t' y'all, y' c'n pick anothah bahtendah."

"N-no, you'll d-d-do just—jes' fahn," he stammered.

Tina lightly brushed a cupped palm over his bared forearm. "Ah jes' *knew* ah's gonna lahk you!" Dimpling, she regarded his red leather suit. "Y' shu-ah know how t'dress sexy! Heah—read this." She handed him a plastic card.

Lionel glanced at it. "I already know the rules. Vinnie filled me in—"

"Hush up!" She touched soft fingertips to his lips.

"Y'almos' broke Rule Numbah Three!"

1. Participants are strictly sworn to secrecy.
2. During Happy Hour, you must not divulge your true shape or identity.
3. Even if you think you recognize a disguised friend, never speak anyone's real name.
4. Despite inoculation, you must assume all risks resulting from consorting with offworlders.
5. Violators of these rules will be deported.

While he read, Tina drummed a complicated rhythm on her keyboard and copied the resultant readout for HORACE, LIONEL B., on the input pad of her ChemPak dispensary. The storage tanks "talked" to one another with a merry twinkle of lights, then the chute door rose. Tina reached in, took the waiting ampoule, affixed it to a hypodermic, rippled her fingers along Lionel's flabby forearm and told him to clench. "Oooh, what a b-i-g fist! Naow this ain' gonna be more'n a li'l sting . . ."

As she plunged in the needle, music blared from Sound Stage A. Lionel turned eagerly toward the sound. "A *live* band?"

"That's th' Nifty Aliens, but doan' worry, hon, now you're inoculated." She pressed a cotton ball to the puncture for a few seconds, then affixed a bandage to the tiny wound. His head lolled against her breast.

"Welcome to Happy Hour," Tina said, without the slightest trace of accent.

TIME: 1800-1815 hours.

PROGRAM: Orientation.

Happy Hour

Tina guided Lionel B. Horace into one of the small cubicles that ring the shell of Sound Stage A. "Heah's wheah you become whoevah," she told him.

"Can't I just be myself?"

"An' be recognized? Uh-uh. Thass a no-no!"

"But I won't know how to behave."

"You'll manage jes' fa-ahn. Now how should ah make y' look?"

"Tall. Slim. Handsome."

Tina squeezed him affectionately. "But youah already a chubby-cute li'l sweetthaht!"

Lionel blushed. "Thank you, but I want to look different."

She clucked reluctantly. "Okay, hon, it's you-ah body. Step into th' transformah."

Nervously, Lionel centered himself in the frame. Even though the manufacturers swore that they'd long since worked out all the bugs—an unfortunate phrasing for Holistic Matter Distributors commonly called Flygates—everyone had heard horror stories of molecular distribution accidents. Commercially, HMDs were solely intended to be used as rapid transportation devices, reassembling objects and persons exactly as transmitted. Cosmetic redistribution was extremely risky, not to mention illegal. This was why Happy Hour participants were sworn to secrecy.

As the Flygate warmed up, the lights flickered. From Sound Stage A Lionel heard thrumming music, then all sound, sight and thought stopped and for several seconds he was beyond dead: the disassembled molecular components of his body filled the HMD's collection chamber . . . and then the world came back in a bright new wash of harmony and hue.

Tina held onto his hand till the dizziness passed. Then, swiveling him round so he faced a full-length mirror, she invited him to inspect the new Lionel B. Horace: six feet

two inches tall; impeccably-layered hair with a curly comma dangling over one eye, a sardonic raked smile and a lean, trim athlete's figure.

He laughed delightedly. "That's really *me*?"

"Foah th' nex' fiftah-fahv minutes," Tina nodded. She held the door open and followed Lionel into Sound Stage A.

His first impressions were confused—a shimmering, sparkling pinwheel of flashing lights and music so loud it redictated his pulse rate, but as he scanned the scene, Lionel began to orient himself. Normally, Sound Stage A was an enormous oval ringed with individual *Los Angeles Ladies* sets—living rooms, sunporches, restaurants, a swimming pool, a hospital waiting room, etc.—its circular central space devoted to cameras and sound booms. But tonight its curved perimeter was compartmented according to activity: three semicircular cocktail bars (Tina took her place behind the nearest one); several gaming tables devoted to baccarat, roulette, backgammon and 4D Ultima; holographic interplay and elbow readings. Lionel was amazed that so much equipment could be moved in so fast in such a short time *for* such a short time. He wondered where all the program's sets had been stored, ditto cameras and sound gear.

The middle of the floor was filled with dancers twisting and gyrating round a raised central platform where the damndest dance band Lionel ever set red eyes on was playing. The Nifty Aliens was a three-piece ensemble made up of a purple-and-gold pinstriped pseudomorph who simultaneously played two Kasiopro keyboards, a red-haired shaggy animal on drums and a stunningly feminine fuchsia-skinned Lilithian who sang with one head and literally doubled on clarinet with the other.

Lionel scanned the crowd on the dance floor, at the bars and at the gaming tables, his new height permitting him a giant's-eye view of the scene, but he recognized no one. Disappointed, he took a seat at Tina's bar, ordered a Larkspur

Happy Hour

Eradicator and stared at his new persona in the mirror. *If I really looked like this, Marie never would have left me.* He chugalugged his drink. As the potent liquor polluted his bloodstream, Lionel imagined that the lights flashing over the dance-floor were bending into sinuous, sensual beams of color.

Interesting, he admitted, but when am I going to start having fun?

TIME: 1816-1830 hours.

PROGRAM: Diversion.

Lionel ambled over to a vacant stool at the baccarat table. The four players sitting there had chosen predictable disguises: one looked like Orson Welles, the second resembled David Niven, the third was a double for Barry Nelson, while the sweaty fourth carbon-copied Peter Lorre. Lionel shoved a wad of quaint currency towards the banker, who swiftly riffle-counted the packet and clatterclicked a pile of casino chips in front of him. Lionel sorted them into three neat piles.

"Bank of one million," the officary announced.

"Banco," Lionel said.

Looking anxious and angry, Lorre slid cards onto the table.

"Nine on the table," said the officary.

Lionel turned over the King of Hearts and Jack of Spades.

The officary said, "Baccarat."

Lionel scooped up his winnings. Just then, something sharp prodded into his back and someone whispered into his ear, "This is a silent airgun. Keep playing till you lose."

"Bank of two million."

"Banco suivi." Lionel counted out the appropriate chips, studied the cards Lorre slid him and asked for a third.

"Six on the table."

Lionel turned over a three, a four and a two, collected his winnings, played the four million bank, won again, accepted the eight million wager—and at that moment the gun muzzle in his back wavered ever so slightly. Instantly, Lionel swiveled, knocking the weapon askew. A whoosh of pressured air; David Niven crumpled to the floor holding his side; still pivoting, Lionel trapped the trigger arm of Lorre's henchman in a grip that snapped the man's fingers and with the same swift motion he hurtled out of his chair, narrowly avoiding the bullet Lorre fired. Lionel hefted his Baretta and squeezed off a round. Lorre clutched at his heart as sudden blood stained his dinner jacket.

Lionel returned to Tina's bar. Happy Hour was certainly diverting, he thought, but it still hadn't lived up to its name.

TIME: 1831–1845 hours.

PROGRAM: Involvement.

At the moment, only Lionel and the Nifty Aliens, who were taking a break, sat at Tina's bar.

"Wassa trouble, sweetahpah?" Tina asked. "Y' doan look lahk y'r enjoyin' yose'f."

"Not very much, I'm afraid", Lionel confessed, staring at a roomful of celebrants involved in Happy Hour's many diversions. "I'm not interested in gambling or fortune-telling, I don't dance, and there's nobody to talk to."

"What do *we* look like? Chopped grutchah?" the two headed fuschia-skinned Lilithian singer-clarinettist said in unison.

Lionel waved at them uncertainly. "Hi. I'm—" Tina tsk-tsked warningly and he stopped himself from violating Regulation # 2. "Call me Bond. James Bond."

The Lilithian's left (brunette) head replied, "We're Beatrice—"

"—and you're not," the auburn head on the right added.

Lionel nodded. "That's for certain."

Happy Hour

"Would you like to be?" she/they asked, invitingly batting four lids over two sets of green catlike eyes.

"How would that be possible?" Lionel wondered.

"Come along with we—"

"—and you'll find out!"

So Lionel followed them into one of the small perimeter chambers. Taking his hand, Beatrice led him towards a familiar-looking portal. "But that's a Flygate!" he protested.

"So?"

"It's dangerous!"

"Yes. That's half the fun. Coming?"

Lionel was too drunk and Beatrice was too beautiful to resist. He stepped through the HMD's shimmering blue portal and began to unite with the sensual offworlder. *So this is what it's like to be a woman*, he thought. *Free. But so vulnerable.* Their hips and breasts and limbs merged as Beatrice's hands clasped his from within and guided their melded flesh in a frenzy of narcissistic exploration. Shared hearts beat faster, overlaid lungs rose and fell rapidly, but then Lionel coupled his mind to theirs—

ah Beatrice ahh Beatrice Beatrice ahhh

—and suddenly he felt cut off. Lonely. Unsatisfied. *Diminished.* He pulled away from them.

Beatrice's auburn head reintegrated. "What's wrong?"

"You shut me out."

"Nonsense!"

"I was just a tool."

"You were as much a part of it *and* us as any Lilithian ever would permit. If that's not enough for you, I'm sorry, but that's the way we are."

"Never mind," he said, "it was my fault." And it was. Even though his wife walked out on him, Lionel still felt married, ergo guilty, ergo isolated. *Marie is the only woman I've ever wanted.*

Marvin Kaye

Collecting himself, Lionel went back to Tina's bar, ordered another Larkspur Eradicator and sipped it as he stared morosely into his own mirrored crimson eyes. *Maybe*, he reflected, *I look different, but inside I'm still the same short, fat ugly wimp I've always been.*

He was not happy.

TIME: 1846-1900 hours.

PROGRAM: Apotheosis.

Someone tapped him on the shoulder. He turned but saw no one.

"Down here, boss." The odd, soupy voice came from below. Lionel looked floorwards and saw a dwarf clad in a white tropic-wear suit. He recognized the disguise as a Flygate clone of Herve Villechaize, an actor he remembered from an ancient TV series that he studied at the Cosmic Museum of Broadcasting when he was preparing for his qualifying certificate in one-camera location shooting.

The dwarf proffered a silver platter on which rested an envelope addressed to James Bond. Lionel opened it and read pencil-scrawled words on a sheet of *Los Angeles Ladies* letterhead—

IN RE PROMISE: GO TO CUBE 34.

The sound stage's outer compartments served as dressing rooms and prop storage cells. Lionel hurried to cube 34 . . . and there she was! Though she sat with her back to him, he immediately recognized her red-brown tresses. The edge of a wine glass rested against her lower lip. She looked tired and sad. In spite of Regulation # 3, Lionel almost whispered her name, but he knew she wouldn't recognize his disguise, so he confined himself instead to clearing his throat.

Happy Hour

Marie turned, studied him appreciatively and said, "Hello, stranger. There's not much time. I cost thirty-five credits."

"What?!"

"Too expensive, handsome? Don't you think I'm worth it?"

"Just the opposite!" he babbled, feverishly counting money into her hand. Though Lionel was shocked that his wife had become a high-priced hooker, he was also overwhelmingly excited that against all odds, he could again enjoy her addictively sweet body. "You're worth more, much *much* more!" Radiant at the compliment, she hugged him impulsively and as he gazed passionately at her, he wished he could lose himself in the liquid depths of her sea-green eyes—and then he recollected that he could do just that.

"Where are you taking me?" she asked. "Happy Hour'll be over in a few minutes!"

"Yes!" He tugged her by the hand. "It's only a few cubes away. Hurry!"

They ran to the private chamber he'd shared with Beatrice and before Marie could protest, Lionel pulled her into the Flygate

and husband and wife interpenetrate and for the first time in his sad life, Lionel understands a loneliness other than his own, that of a frightened little girl so abused by her parents and her lovers that she ran away from Lionel lest he become too important to her and end up hurting her, too, but now Lionel enfolds her in an embrace so tender that Marie finally relinquishes all her outworn fears and willingly joins her mind and body and spirit to him in an intimacy more perfect than love and at last Lionel B. Horace is supremely happy

Someone shook his shoulder. "Wake up, Lonny! Happy Hour's over."

"Wha-a-? Where am I?" Groggily aware that he'd regained his customary shape, height and weight, Lionel opened his eyes and saw that he was sitting in the antechamber where Tina inoculated him. The only other person in the room was Vincent Michaels. He clutched his employer's arm. "Vinnie, where's Marie?"

"I sent her home to rest till she feels more like herself." Michaels clucked dolefully. "It was no easy task separating you two from one another."

"I've got to find her."

"Not now, Lonny. She doesn't know who you really are, remember?"

"But we totally shared each other!"

"And you left her mighty confused. Guess what she told me? That she wishes her husband was more like *you*."

"Oh, what a mess!" Lionel wrung his hands. "What'll I do?"

"Give her time, Lonny. Go slow. Come next Happy Hour, she'll be dying to see you."

A wan, hopeful smile. "You *really* think so, Vinnie?"

"I know so. Now come on, I'll help you home. You had too many Larkspur Eradicators." Resting a hand on his cameraperson's meaty shoulder, the executive steered him through the door and into the nearest commuter HMD.

After the men were gone, Tina entered the room, switched off the computer, closed and security-locked her ChemPak dispensary, packed up her tapes and hypodermic and departed. On her way out through Sound Stage A, she shivered with self-conscious delight at the first-hand glimpse she got of the soap opera sets. Though she never would have admitted it to her colleagues, *Los Angeles Ladies* was Tina's favorite TV program.

When Lionel's head hit the pillow, his carrot-colored toupee skewed ridiculously, but he was already asleep. Vincent

Happy Hour

Michaels set the hairpiece on a night-table, removed his employee's brick-orange shoes, covered him with a blanket, turned off the light and left the bedroom. On his way to the front door, he noticed a crumpled note tossed on a tabletop in the entry alcove. He unfolded the scrap of paper and read it.

Lionel, you are a short fat ugly wimp. I am leaving you—Marie

By now, she must be halfway across the galaxy, Michaels thought grimly.

In old L. A., some producers allegedly distributed pills to high-strung talent, but Vincent Michaels handled staff emotional problems with electrochemical hypnotherapy. An expert like Tina Wasserman was expensive, but compared to charter-fighting in replacement personnel, she was the most cost-efficient option. *In Lonny's case*, the A. P. mused, *Tina and Happy Hour have salvaged a first-rate cameraperson.*

At least until the next shuttle.



She reached the little ladder at the foot of the bunk bed and started climbing it . . . (Art: Randy Broecker)

Michael D. Toman

THE OLD LAUGHING LADY

Michael D. Toman is a writer and poet who lives in California. He has published short fiction in both Europe and the United States and was most recently featured in Pulphouse 6. Short stories are forthcoming in Cold Shocks and The Last Dangerous Visions, and Michael previously appeared in Fantasy Tales in 1981 with a haunting vignette, "Weirwood". He says that the story which follows was inspired by his re-reading the work of Robert Aickman.

It had happened again. He had *let it* happen again.

The last time had been bad enough but this time it had been worse because he had sworn to himself that he would never let it happen that way again and then he had let things go just like all of the other times. But this time he had almost cut it too fine, and the knowledge of how close Matthew Cooper had come to the brink kept his thoughts whirling even now that he had handed in the paper and it was finally over.

Fatigue was a soft warm fog which hovered just beyond

the range of his peripheral vision; a constant light caress at the back of his head.

After he had finished it, finished *typing* it, with only about an hour to go before he had to turn it in for class, he had forced himself to proofread it before he had thrown himself into the shower. Making the water as hot as he could stand it for one blissful nano-second, he then proceeded to wrench the hot water faucet all the way over to the side and off, involuntarily squeaking at the shock of the cold shower. Rubbing the towel against his inflamed eyes, he had been startled by the sharpness of the familiar posters over the desk, revealed in the sudden glare of the lamp. The eyes of the wolf on the wall had seemed to watch him as he tried to find a pair of socks that matched without awakening his roommate Gary.

Matthew stretched and tried to find a more comfortable position in his uncomfortable chair in the "No Smoking" Lounge of the Student Union. What he really wanted was one of the two couches but they, like every chair in the place, were occupied. He debated briefly with himself about whether or not he should walk across the hall and see if there were any couches free in the "Smoking" Lounge at the possible risk of losing the chair he had.

Inertia won.

Even though he had vigorously brushed and flossed his teeth not less than three hours before walking over to the Morrill Building and handing the paper in to his professor's box before the deadline of noon today (and ten minutes after another one of his classes had already started less than fifteen feet away), and had then shambled immediately over to the Union Building, his mouth still tasted of dead pennies.

He had lost the time looking for a folder purchased specifically for the paper, a red folder which he had been unable to turn up, and he had finally settled for using just a paperclip. He hadn't felt like walking into his other class late.

The Old Laughing Lady

It was the paper that counted today, not the attendance record of his still warm corpse.

Now he had plenty of time to rest or even to take a nap if he felt like it, since his next class wasn't until two o'clock and was nothing but a review session for business reference books for his reference class. He could be stiff and flyblown for that one with no academic harm done.

His eyes ached and his fingers twitched occasionally, as if tardily protesting the heavy amount of typing he had done within the last eight hours. There was a bruise developing on the side of his left hand, the one that he had been forced to use that night and morning. The pain and the caffeine content of the six cans of rotgut cola he had consumed had helped to keep him awake even after his constant sneezing and dripping had forced him to take one of the hayfever allergy pills that always made him so sleepy. The night had been uncharacteristically hot and humid, the rain always threatening but never quite materializing, and his nose had run like a river at flood-tide, forcing him to constantly snuffle while breathing through his mouth in short gasps, plucking at his Kleenex box like a drowning man.

It had certainly been one hell of a night for Matt Cooper.

He slouched down even lower in the chair and kept a covert eye upon the occupants of the couches at the opposite ends of the lounge. One guy down at the far end was stretched out like Matt wanted to be, oblivious to the world. The other couch closer to him was being used by a blonde co-ed, her hair still in dripping wet strands. She had three books and an assortment of papers spread out before her which she was engaged in painstakingly marking with a yellow high-lighter pen, in what seemed to Matthew to be a random order.

There was just enough space at the end of the couch for one person.

No, he wasn't quite to the point yet of sauntering over,

taking off his shoes, sliding them under the couch with his briefcase, and availing himself of as much couch space as was available with the abandon of blatant sexual harassment. *Certainly not.*

But he was getting there. Hadn't the place been cluttered with coffee tables for just such a purpose as that beautiful, soft, *horizontal* couch was now being wilfully and perversely subjected to?

He massaged his face with both hands and yawned so hard that he thought his ears would pop.

His head seemed to be buzzing in counterpoint with the usual late morning sounds of people and elevators in the Union Building, the pattern of noise being intermittently interrupted by the rush of rain and thunderboomers to the west. He had been about ten yards from the Union when the first drops had hit and had managed to sprint up the steps in time to avoid getting *completely* drenched.

The Muzak over the loudspeaker was playing an homogenized version of music that naggingly eluded identification, something the mail-order companies on the tube would probably classify under the generic term of "easy listening". It certainly seemed like the right soundtrack for the sounds of elevators and people.

The paper had been an end of the term project which would count for 40% of his grade in the Book Selection class. It shouldn't have been that difficult to finish early. It had been the one major paper left for him to do to complete the requirements for his master's degree in library science. MLS. A nine-month academic wonder

...

He had already done his "Library Experience" working in his hometown library and had already taken the Library Research class, sweating through the paper required for it, done in lieu of a dissertation which at the time had seemed to

The Old Laughing Lady

be as bad as (if not actually worse than) doing a dissertation in the first place.

Cataloguing he took his first term at Swigart College. It had been a hellish round of assigning call numbers to books with arcane topics and then typing those call numbers with even more arcane publishing information on catalog cards with all of the spacing *just so*, neither one space to the left nor one space to the right of the officially approved format, and he hadn't much liked that, either. But he had survived it, too.

He hadn't known that he could hate *anything* more than his old job of pushing a broom and making coffee and cleaning latrines at the factory until he had taken that cataloguing course. But he had survived it.

But then there were a lot of things he hadn't known that he wouldn't like to do until he had done them. It sometimes seemed like there were more of them every year since he had graduated with his spiffy-shiny B.A. from State (a four-year wonder) and a virgin teaching certificate that he never validated. (He hadn't even *tried* to be an English teacher, despite what was, all things considered, a good if not outstanding "Teaching Experience" as a student teacher and a job outlook for English teachers that he had to admit wasn't *completely* dismal).

But he had bummed around instead, taking unskilled labour jobs like mapping those gas lines in Preston that one summer, living with his parents until he had finally latched onto the position as a janitor and started saving his money until he could *almost* afford to go back to school four years after he had left it, spending money not just for library school tuition and books but for housing in a *dorm*, too, because he had made the decision to leave again in such a rush there toward the end. It was a strange city, he hadn't really done anything about his own awful (and awfully limited) cooking skills, and

because, well, even with the age difference and everything, it was *easier* . . .

But then Matthew Cooper still didn't really know what he wanted to do with his life at all, except maybe get one of those couches in the "No Smoking" lounge sometime within the next couple of minutes and start sleeping as soundly as the unshaven old man over there in the corner chair, another refugee from the rain whom Matt had occasionally seen wandering around campus talking to himself.

As far as that went, Matt had been talking to himself as recently as five hours ago.

No, it was more like cursing at yourself, right, Matty?

If there were fewer people around, he might be talking to himself even now. He wasn't all that positive that he wasn't doing just that anyway.

Was that the reason? Was that why I couldn't finish the damn thing?

That paper had been the one major thing left to do, the one obstacle left between him and finally graduating from library school and shaking the dust (make that mud, he thought, listening to the rain on the roof) of Swigart College from his heels and hitting the mails in an attempt to find a "Real Job" and make enough money to repay his parents for the rest of the money used for his "Library School Experience".

And it really wasn't as if he had let *everything* slide until the last minute. He *had* kept up with the work and the readings for his Reference class. He had even established the groundwork for his paper. Otherwise he never would have been able to pull it out of the fire, despite his history of miraculous saves.

In his mind and in a "paper projection" he had diligently created the hypothetical library that he was supposed to be selecting books for and then had just as diligently (yea, even methodically!) spent time during the last six weeks in the research library checking *Library Journal* and *Publishers*

The Old Laughing Lady

Weekly and *Booklist* and the rest of the usual gaggle of recommended review sources for books and films and slides and filmstrips and all of the rest of it, even unto *realia*, that he was allowed to use to make up his list of recommended purchases.

Everyone in class was given a hypothetical book budget of \$2,000 for use in an equally hypothetical month. It was all a simulation game of bookbuying, especially with that given figure of \$2,000, an amount which even Professor Minock was forced to admit was more than slightly unreal in the face of current developments in local library finances and the overall national budget crunch facing libraries, but that should have been all right. Hell, he *liked* books. That was the major reason why he had thought of becoming a librarian in the first place. He even liked reading *reviews* even though he was no great shakes at writing the little suckers. (Formats had to be followed here as well as in cataloguing. *How do you space an opinion?*)

So he had read the reviews and taken down titles and prices and made copies of reviews of those books and audio-visual materials he was unsure about that he thought he might want to use in case he came up short, since the object of the game was to spend as much of the \$2,000 as possible without exceeding the given amount.

"They'll give you less money the next time if they think you can get by with less money!" Professor Minock didn't have much trust in the "library awareness" of school boards, city councils, or practically anybody (or *any body!*) to whom or to which a librarian might be made responsible for providing a justification of his or her budget. *To wit, therefore: et. al.*

It was all a game, an attempt to bring forth an order form out of chaos.

But somehow the paper which had started as a flyspeck of a note on the course syllabus, changing all unnoticed into a

gnat buzzing at the back of his brain in the first weeks of the ten-week term, became a bleeding albatross around his neck, leaving a bad smell in his mind that somehow managed to awaken him always just a few precious minutes before the alarm was set to go off in the morning while keeping him awake at night, finally metamorphosing into the leather-winged pterodactyl of Saturday night's dreamshow, the taloned creation of a late-night pizza with a double portion of pepperoni and anxiety, its hissing cries disturbing the last moments of sleep that he had managed to snatch before finally coming to grips with *the damned thing*.

The trouble with doing things at the last moment was that it wasn't just the last minute; it was the last six weeks and then the last week and then the last forty-eight hours and then the last twenty-four hours and then sixteen and then eight until the dam had finally burst somewhere inside his head while he had been sitting in front of his typewriter down at the end of the hall in the floor's activity room, popsick and sneezing. He had moved there a couple of hours earlier in response to Gary's entreaties, taking with him his portable typewriter, three cans of lukewarm Coke, and the confetti ingredients of his paper.

His fingers had finally, *finally* started moving as he began to type titles, prices, and annotations, explaining why each and every item selected was an absolute "*Must Buy!*" for the collection. The waters had rushed through the break in the obdurate stone that had become his mind in the last few weeks and the old familiar magic had begun again, the enchantment which would see as its final effect not a rabbit plucked screaming from a hat but a fairly neatly typed if somewhat *hastily* proofread paper of not less than an x amount of minimum pages, aided by cleverly spaced margins and paragraphing done with an adept eye for graphically subtle padding. And if the paper, in addition to fulfilling the wordage requirement, also obeyed the dictates of (hopefully) logical

The Old Laughing Lady

development against the hard place of increasingly frenzied, against-the-gun thought, well, then, so much the—

Matthew's head snapped back as if he had been suddenly and unexpectedly garrotted.

Hell, isn't she ever going to pick up her books and leave?

The desire for sleep pulled at him like an insistent undertow. The rain danced upon the roof and then spat and lapped at the windows again.

He glanced at the large clock on the wall. Ten after eleven.

The final draft had a ragged line of secondary margins across the page from where the carriage stuck about every twenty-seven characters. He had started playing twenty-seven-character *SLAAAM!* along about 3 a.m. when his less-than-trusty typewriter had for some reason chosen that moment to go crazy on him.

Along about the thirty-fourth annotation (along about four in the ayem) he decided that he couldn't make any sense out of what he was typing as he watched it emerge ever so slowly from the keys onto the page as he ran out of ways to say the same thing. He wasn't exactly sure when he slumped over the typewriter for a short break, only to awaken in sweating, ribbon-stained disorder at a time that according to his stopped watch was only twenty minutes later than it had been the last time he had checked it. A quick trip down the hall and a peek inside the room at the clock beside the bunk that contained that blissfully sleeping bastard Gary, revealed it to be closer to three hours than twenty minutes. His watch had run down with the rest of his life and it was really closer to seven than to four.

The face in the bathroom mirror had been unfamiliar. He had thrown some cold water into its feral eyes from his cupped and shaking hands and then stumped back down the corridor on borrowed legs to go back to work, adrenalin fighting Antarctic apathy every step of the way.

It had been a near thing.

He glanced at the clock again. 11.30.

He heard snoring from behind him. Craning his head, he saw that it was the old man on the couch. The rivet in his neck ached.

Matthew turned and saw Professor Zussman standing before him. Was she angry with him for cutting her class? Matthew's heart felt like a blood-red hummingbird fluttering in his birdcage chest.

Professor Zussman stood over him, Matthew's paper held in her hand. She shook it at him with a sudden gesture. "*Have you been lashed in the flood of the mammoth?*"

Matthew didn't understand her. He felt a long beak poke at him from inside with tiny flames.

"I'm sorry, Professor Zussman, but I had this paper to write and—"

"*That's not good enough, Cooper.*"

"But it's only a review session for the final and I've read the material!" Matt was one of her best students, always coming up with the right answer whenever they discussed library philosophy in class. She taught the "overview" course on the history of libraries and she liked him. He *knew* that, knew it and counted on it now. Hadn't he always been able to talk his way out of scrapes like this in the past?

The woman in the wet raincoat before him wasn't mollified. She shook her head and black drops of water fell off her plastic rainhat and onto Matthew's legs. "*Don't you know that the saber-tooth is in the furnace with the bedbug and the machine?*"

What was she saying? How could he talk to her if he couldn't understand what she was saying?

Matthew was having more and more difficulty getting enough air to breathe. Each breath he took only made him feel ticklish in his chest and made the hummingbird angry.

The Old Laughing Lady

Professor Zussman shoved him back against the chair and then held him with one arm while pulling something out of her raincoat pocket. Matthew didn't want to know what it was. He kicked up at his professor and succeeded in knocking the chair over on its side.

The blonde co-ed jumped up and hissed at him like the pterodactyl in his dream, her long nails scratching at his eyes.

Matthew flinched, covered his eyes with his hands, and woke up.

Standing before him was Professor Zussman in a wet raincoat. She took her hat off and shook a few drops of water off it onto the carpet.

Matthew was speechless. The water made a dark stain upon the carpet in front of him.

"Sorry if I startled you, Matt, but you weren't in class today and I thought I'd ask why as long as I saw you here." Zussman took a halting step forward toward him.

Matthew did something that was halfway between a giggle and a gasp and then started choking. Professor Zussman drew back, looking startled, and then moved forward again, as if to slap Matthew on the back. "You know that students who cut classes have to wear glasses, don't you?"

That was when Matthew saw the glasses in her right hand.

"You can't argue with paleontology!"

And then he awoke again, the hummingbird buzz of the Union Building in his ears, a wetness cool upon the right side of his mouth. He got up from his slouched position in the chair and wiped at his mouth with the side of his hand. *What? What?*

He looked around to see if anyone was watching him. The other occupants of the lounge seemed to be oblivious to his presence.

Damn it, he'd drooled in his sleep again. He always hated it whenever he did that.

He glanced up at the clock, trying to orient himself in the world of the Union Building surrounding him. *Twenty after eleven.*

He sneezed three times in rapid succession.

It was pretty obvious what was happening. He was still concerned about typing the paper and handing it in. The events of last night and this morning, combined with the bonecrunched fatigue he felt, had slopped together in his fetid kettle of dreams and given him one Mulligan stew of a nightmare. You didn't have to be a psychology major to figure that one out.

He wondered what Jenny would have had to say about it. She was a psychology major, or at least had been the last time he had seen her at State. In the year and a half or thereabouts they had gone together she had certainly had enough to say to him about enough *other* things.

But he had to be fair. He'd said enough things to her to hold up his end of their relationship. They had managed to be pretty open with each other about their likes and dislikes about each other, especially their dislikes toward the end.

Offhand he could recall only two things that he had considered telling her that he had finally restrained himself from blurting out. One was the dream in which they had been making love when Jenny had suddenly become a suitcase, a *white* suitcase, causing him to lose part of his tongue in the lock mechanism. The other was the sudden uprushing sensation of release that he had felt when they *finally* broke up after that last verbal fire-fight in the shower.

His joy had been embarrassing. He had always thought of himself as being, above all else, a *reasonable* man. Reasonable and fair.

Okay, if his mind was going to play tricks on him like that, it was damn well time to get the lead marbles out of his ass and

The Old Laughing Lady

pick up and leave, no matter how tired he was. It was getting too warm in here anyway.

He moved to get up and felt a *tsunami* wave of dizziness drop straight down on his head. His mouth was wet but his throat was dry.

Someone tapped him from behind on his right shoulder. *Who?*

It was Jenny. She was wearing her hair down the same way she had worn it the first month they had gone together. They were standing in front of the main door of his old high school. It was a bright, sunswept day. Too bright. He wondered where he had left his sunglasses.

"Matthew! Come onnn!" she said, in the same whining tone she always used when she was annoyed with him.

It was the end of the term and he had forgotten all about his German class and now it was time for the final exam and he couldn't even remember which room it was in.

No, wait a minute, he didn't have to take the final, he'd done that already when he was in high school.

But wasn't he in high school *now*?

He looked at his hands, first the right one and then the other one. Then he looked at his left hand. "It's all right, it's all right," he thought. He'd read somewhere that if you can see your hands you'll be OK. But what was he doing in high school again?

"Matthew, hurry up or the bell will ring and we'll be late!"

Jenny was wearing a nurse's uniform that was a couple of sizes too big for her. When she turned toward him the nipple of one breast seemed to be peeping shyly from between the buttons of her blouse.

"I'm going inside. I can't wait for you anymore. I can't hate for you anymore."

"But I'm not in high school anymore!" Matthew screamed at her.

He heard the sound of laughter somewhere in the distance behind him.

But it was true. Didn't he have the yellow card with all of his grades on it to prove it? He put his hands in the pockets of his jeans but couldn't find the card, not even in the pocket in the back where his green wallet was.

If he didn't have the yellow card he couldn't tell them what classes he had taken and he would have to take the classes over again. He'd lost it somehow and now he had to go back.

Unless he could steal the copy the Registrar kept in her office on the third floor.

The bell rang and the big glass mirror doors slammed shut, hitting his hands. But he knew where the back door through the shop class was and he could get in that way if he could make himself look like everybody else.

He ran around the building and tried to open the blue door marked "AUTO". It was locked, too.

Something or someone laughed again.

Should he bang on it or should he try to get in through the gym door? In order to do that he would have to cut around the parking lot and then the open field, across the baseball diamond in the back and over the fences through the football stadium, past the swimming pool and then through the girls' gym section until he could get to a door that would let him inside.

Then he was there, out of breath from running, and he was surrounded by strange kids he'd never seen before, and they were all climbing the rungs on the sides of the stairwells because the stairs had wet paint on them. He had to get to the room on the third floor where the Registrar's office was but the big kid in front of him wouldn't get out of the way.

"Hey! Move it, turkey!"

But the guy, who looked like a football player, wouldn't hurry up and just kept blocking his way. It was hard enough

The Old Laughing Lady

climbing on the rungs in the walls without touching the striped paint on the stairs without this big lummoX taking up all of the rungspace and slowing him down.

Then he finally got off the rungs and was on the deserted third floor. There were only a few classrooms up here and the Registrar's office. Matthew could hear the murmuring voices of students in their homerooms beneath him. He couldn't remember his homeroom number.

Why should he? He didn't belong here anyway. It was all a mistake.

He looked over the railing into an abyss of painted stairs, striped stairs with glittering stars on them. He backed away, afraid of losing his balance. His breath came quickly and he looked around to see if anybody was watching him.

He had lost his green wallet somehow while climbing up here but if he could get the yellow card everything would be all right.

Go away, be quiet, somebody will hear you. This is no time to laugh.

His legs were unsteady after his exercise. He hadn't climbed rungs since he had brewed coffee for the rest of the guys in the pits in college.

He knew he had to hurry. It sounded like it was time for the bell to ring again. There always seemed to be a hush just before the last bell went off.

He walked down the hall, past the lockers, trying not to move too quickly or to attract attention to himself. He would be all right if he could get past the other classrooms without being stopped and asked why he was out roaming the halls when he should have been in his homeroom. The secretaries in the Registrar's office liked him and would help him, he was sure. Didn't they always smile at him when he brought in his monthly reports from Student Council?

But one of the classrooms had an open door and he could hear voices coming from inside. Voices talking in German. He couldn't understand what they were saying but he knew that it was German.

He had found his German class after all. It was between him and the Registrar's office. Could he sneak past Professor Zussman and get to the Registrar's files where they kept his yellow card? Should he try to sneak past or just walk by normally?

The laughter behind him, closer now, made him move forward.

OK, he would brazen it out. After all, he was a college graduate, wasn't he? This wasn't like applying for a job or anything scary like that.

He decided to risk a glance inside the classroom. A quick look shouldn't be too dangerous. If anybody stopped him he would just say that he was a visitor. By the time they checked up on him it would be too late, right? He wasn't the one making all the noise laughing, after all.

Something about that laughter, something he didn't want to think about . . .

That was when he saw Jenny in the front row. She was responding to Professor Zussman in that question-and-answer routine that Matthew had always hated learning so much.

Professor Zussman asked her a question. "*Güd day müre tha thü?*"

"Bay dew hüsth; ah nile onam inn!"

Jenny stood up and pointed at Matthew as he stood there, stunned.

He started running down the hall toward the stairs, having suddenly remembered that the Registrar's office *wasn't* on the third floor. It had been moved to the first floor, close to his locker, in the other wing of the building, right next to the school cafeteria. Now he couldn't even

The Old Laughing Lady

remember for sure where his locker was, much less the combination.

Couldn't he do anything right?

He didn't care about the yellow card anymore. He just had to get away from them, away from them and from the laughter.

Then the bell rang next to his ear and the hall was filled with students and he was pushed down the stairs, his feet slipping on the worn edges of the steps just like he'd always feared would happen, the fresh paint coming off on his new tennis shoes and his white shirt and white jeans.

Somebody straight-armed him in the throat and he couldn't even scream. The Registrar grabbed him by the arm, pinching him, and said, very clearly and very politely, "*Don't you know that the inquiry into a scream is merely another scream? Now go away and don't bother me again!*"

Then he heard the laughter again, coming from somewhere in front of him now. Heard it and remembered the two times he had heard it before.

And opened his eyes as he sat slouched in the chair, unwillingly opened his eyes as sweat dripped from his forehead into them, *aware* but unsure that he was indeed awake, listening for the laughter.

The "No Smoking" lounge seemed to be enveloped in thick smoke. From where he sat he could only see the other people in the chairs before him. Was he surrounded by smoke or thick fog?

No one moved, no one spoke. He could not hear the elevators or the Muzak.

The thunder and rain sounds came to his ears as if his ears had been stuffed with cotton.

Matthew didn't move. He couldn't move, not even his head. He recognized that laugh. He knew and *feared* that laugh. It was *her* laugh.

He didn't know how old he was the first time he heard it. All he remembered was that he was still a small child. His parents had taken him and his sister up to the cabin with them to visit a couple of sets of aunts and uncles and assorted cousins.

There wasn't enough bedspace for everyone so people were sleeping on the floor in the back room, the bunkroom. The bunkroom was a new addition to the cabin and still had a faint smell of pine and pitch. (He had already been caught twice peeling bits of bark off the logs and told not to do it again.)

He had to sleep in one of the bottom bunks with his older sister.

It was strange sleeping in a bed with another person with so many other people around all making funny sleeping noises, even if they were all relatives. Not only that, but the heater in the room woke him up a couple of times in the night as it turned itself on and off.

He was sleeping on the inside of the bunk, next to the wall, when he was awakened for the third time by the sound of someone moving among the sleepers on the floor, just a shape in the darkness since the windowshades had been drawn against the moonlight.

Now Matthew was wide awake. The figure, which he could just see over his sister's left arm, seemed to be picking its way through the sleepers without stepping on any of them, moving toward the other bunk bed at the opposite end of the room.

Matthew heard the figure laugh. No one else moved. He couldn't move or do anything where he was, not even to shiver or to cry out to his sister or to his parents sleeping above them.

He had recognized, or thought he recognized, who was in the bunkroom with them.

It was the wicked witch from *Snow White*.

He couldn't see her face (he didn't *want* to see her face) but he knew that it was the witch. She reached the little ladder at

The Old Laughing Lady

the foot of the bunkbed and started climbing it, up to where Uncle Webb was sleeping alone. Matthew watched as she drew herself up and then laid herself down next to him. He thought he would wet his pants in his sudden terror.

The sound of Uncle Webb's snoring changed. It was nothing like a choke or a gasp but just a longer exhalation of breath, a little sigh that was the most horrible thing that Matthew had ever heard.

He closed his eyes convulsively but he could not stop himself from listening. He could not be sure but after a moment he thought he heard two people moving among the outstretched sleepers. The snores and breathing continued on through the night and everything was as it had been, except that now Matthew could not hear Uncle Webb anymore. He stayed awake as long as he could but finally fell asleep just before dawn.

Then he was rudely awakened and pulled out of bed. All around him was confusion. Uncle Webb had been found dead in his bunk of a sudden heart attack. When he tried to tell his mother about the witch she had just looked at him oddly for a moment and then told him that it was just a bad dream in the night.

He was young enough not to accept that completely but also to forget about it, as much as anyone can forget anything. Later, when he thought about it, he considered alternative explanations for what he had seen but never talked about them.

That memory was buried deep in his mind the day he had to go to the hospital because of a bad skin rash. He was twelve years old. For some reason that he never understood he hadn't been put in with the other kids in the children's ward.

Instead he had been given a bed in the adult section, where he was surrounded by older men in hospital beds who seemed rough and coarse to him.

They even made fun of his reading comic books, picking them up and passing them around, even reading them with their pages folded back.

They just couldn't seem to understand that he didn't want them folding the pages back on his comic book collection, much less losing last month's issue of *Air Ace Comics*. If he lost that he wouldn't have a complete collection of the stories featuring Werther von Wolff, "the Wolf of Hell", who was a good guy even if he was a World War I flying ace for the Germans.

One guy in particular kept talking about his experiences in World War Two fighting "Krauts" and using bad language and wouldn't leave Matthew alone so that he could read his comic books in peace, until some of the other guys finally made him shut up.

But that wasn't the worst part. He thought that he had finally hit that the first night that he was there when the doctor wanted him to take some kind of a pill and wouldn't tell him what it was for. Matthew was just supposed to take it.

Matthew never liked taking pills, anyway. He liked doctors and nurses even less. So when they couldn't get him to swallow the pill without telling him why, they proceeded to subject him to the worst indignity that he could imagine being perpetrated upon him in front of all of the other patients.

That was the night that he decided that he would never trust another doctor or nurse as long as he lived, much less *like* them, a vow that he still remembered.

No, they hadn't been able to get him to *swallow* a pill. They hadn't tried talking to him, either.

It took four of them, three nurses and a doctor, to get the pill into him and even then he put up a struggle that would have done credit to a von Wolff, who only had to contend with the other enemy aces and the certainty that "the sky is the killer of us all" and who certainly never had to deal with the

The Old Laughing Lady

ignominious sense of defeat and violation that Matthew felt afterwards.

Somewhat to his surprise, the other men had been okay. There had even been shouts and occasional cries of encouragement. "Get 'em, Tiger! Watch out for your flank!"

He waited until lights out and everybody seemed to be asleep and then he painstakingly managed to fish it out. Maybe he was only twelve years old but he would be *damned* before he let them get away with giving him a pill *that way*.

It had certainly been one hell of a fight while it lasted. Exhaustion finally accomplished the task the sleeping pill had been meant to do and he drifted off into uneasy slumber.

Matthew woke up when he heard what he thought was one of the nurses moving outside in the corridor. He'd hidden the pill in his bedding but he wasn't sure that one of the men hadn't snitched on him after he had fallen asleep. He was not going to let them do *that* to him again.

But there was something strange about the sound the nurse's shoes made. The nurses all wore shoes with soft soles. Those weren't nurse's shoes he heard.

He was facing the wall. Now he turned over slowly, feigning sleep, his eyes open a fraction of an inch, his body like a tensed spring. He could hear the sounds of snoring and breathing in the long hospital room. There was more light in the room than he was used to sleeping in at home in his bedroom, even though the shades were drawn, but he still couldn't quite make out the face of the figure at the end of the room, bent over one of the men.

Then he heard the laughter.

This time he hadn't closed his eyes. He watched, taking light, shallow breaths that he hoped would fool them, would fool *her*, as they moved away from the body on the bed. No one else was awake.

She wasn't the witch from *Snow White*. He knew that now, even though he didn't know who or what she was. She walked a couple of steps ahead of the other shadowy figure, as if guiding him.

No, that wasn't it. He *had* to follow her. She was leading him away. Matthew realized that when the second figure tried to pull back and she made him come closer with a slight gesture of her hand, as if he were a puppet on a string.

Then they were walking toward Matthew past the row of beds filled with sleeping men, walking toward him and away from him at the same time as if he were somehow watching them through the wrong end of a telescope, and then Matthew had blinked and they were gone.

But he had never forgotten her laughter, the same laughter that he now heard coming toward him from the entrance to the lounge.

What face had the man at the far end of the room seen before he died?

"Oh God who maybe art in Heaven hallowed be thy name thy kingdom come thy will be done now I lay me down to sleep I pray my lord my soul to keep Jesus Jesus *don't look don't look don't look* she sees me this time she's coming for me this time nobody else can see her nobody else can hear her laughter the killer of us all *she knows who I am* it's the third time it's the third time—"

Then Matthew looked at her face.

Looked, and saw the face of an old woman, her eyes clouded by cataracts. She laughed again, not six feet from where he sat transfixed by fear, and it was the laughter of an insane old woman. Then she moved toward him with the infirm but determined step of the aged.

She moved toward him, passing so close to his right hand that he could have reached out and touched her, and then

The Old Laughing Lady

shuffled past him, behind his head, while his spine ached with terror and his ears burned.

Behind him he heard once again the sigh, the small sounds of death. Fear prickled his heart. He closed his eyes. The old man, she must have chosen the old man in the chair. There was no one else she could have chosen.

Again he heard her movements behind him and for a moment that seemed to last forever he thought she stopped, as if confused or hesitant, just behind him and beyond his peripheral vision.

Was that her cool breath upon his right ear? Was she bending toward him even now?

Thunder split his skull open and the lights of the lounge seared his eyes. All around him were the sights and sounds of the Union Building, as if the fog he had seen had been dispelled by a blast of fiery wind. His shirt was soaking wet from perspiration.

He got up, stumbling in his haste, and then fell to the carpet.

He had to get out of there.

He was almost to the door outside when he realized that he had forgotten his briefcase and jacket. It took a conscious effort of will for him to stop. Should he go back there?

Soon, soon, there would be a discovery, he knew it as surely as he knew anything, and he did not want to be there again when it happened. Three times, three times was always the charm in fairy tales. He had seen her three times and now he could get away. She had taken the old man and spared him. That was all he knew. He didn't need a yellow card. He had been given another chance. He didn't need a green wallet. He didn't need to be *afraid*.

The outside doors to the wide world were before him.

Behind him he heard the commotion he had anticipated. They had found the body of the old man at last.

Should he turn and look back?

Michael D. Toman

The old man who had been sleeping in the corner chair elbowed his way past Matthew outside into the rain.

He was wrong. The old laughing lady wasn't fair. He knew now that she didn't keep score and didn't even care.

She had taken the blonde co-ed who had been marking her books in what seemed to be random order, the girl who had taken the couch he had wanted.

Matthew Cooper heard the rain come down hard upon the roof overhead and knew that he would be listening for long remembered laughter for the rest of his life.

And he would never know when it would be for him.

Mike Chinn

DAY OF THE DARK MEN

Mike Chinn last appeared in Fantasy Tales back in 1987. However, his work has been mainly published in comics, where his talents for satirizing science fiction and fantasy have been combined with a flair for this graphic medium. Starblazer Picture Library, from DC Thomson, has published three of the author's Robot Kid series and five interconnected sword & sorcery stories about a "d'Annemarc" dynasty of the "Kingdom of Anglerre". The fifth volume, The Triune Warrior, has tenuous links with the story which follows as the character Garban makes a guest appearance. Meanwhile, Mike also writes short stories and edits Mystique, a fiction annual, for the British Fantasy Society. For fans of the Voidal, "Day of the Dark Men" includes a cameo appearance by that cursed character, originally created by fantasy author Adrian Cole.

Midday found the two men riding down a raised flint road, constructed for the local landowner to oversee the fields of maize that seemed to stretch on to infinity in all directions.

Pale houses or workers' huts dotted the waving landscape like imperfections—each one brooding dead and empty now that the growing season was over for the year. Unshuttered windows stared back blindly at the riders like empty sockets.

The one dressed all in black finished priming his flintlock pistol and slid it back in its saddle holster. He rubbed at his dark beard with dusty gloves and pulled a wry face.

"There's nothing more depressing than an agricultural area in winter, friend Garban," he remarked. "Even in South Lativ."

"At least the sun's shining," replied Garban Quenéed, his gaudy, florid clothing the very opposite of the other's. He inclined his orange-haired head at the pale yellow sun that strained bravely through the erratic cloud. His strange eyes—colourless irises with crimson pupils and orbs—squinted even in that thin light.

"Small comfort," muttered the first.

Garban regarded his companion—hair and eyes as black as his clothing—with ill-disguised wariness. It had been nine months since he had left his alien-landscaped continent home of Vanquéa to naïvely voyage to the lands of Aysan and the Laneenovitch Empire—out of pure curiosity. Nine months of wandering which finally led him to the South Lativic town of Authen: ruled by the paederastic Graav Ilyich Vandersaan. There he had found Vanquéans were still a novelty to the decadent Aysans. The orange-haired man had been tossed into the Graav's gaol, awaiting a home of a more permanent nature: in Vandersaan's private collection.

In the cell he had met the enigmatic Aundré^m Dariéesan: a man either insane or possessed of an awful knowledge. Whichever, they had escaped from the cell—killing the Graav Ilyich Vandersaan on the way—and rode north, through the winter-seized lands of South Lativ to this dismal spot.

The Vanquéan frowned. Was it only last night he had



The creature raised what looked like an old musket. (Art: Jim Pitts)

pinned Vandersaan to his chair with a knife through the mouth? A night's travel with Aundré's joking half-hints seemed an eternity.

The man in black reined in his horse suddenly and stared intently to his left across an endless field of old maize.

"Now what's that?" he mumbled to himself.

"Where?" The Vanquéan slitted his inhuman eyes and looked over the fields.

"There," Aundré pointed a gloved hand. "That flashing." He pulled a pair of field glasses out of their case on the saddle of his stolen horse.

The other saw it then: a rainbow scintillation that was more a flickering than a flashing of light. It had the look of marsh gas, a will-o'-the-wisp—but no natural phenomena could explain the unearthly beauty of the sight, nor the bizarre colours that were stranger by far than those sometimes found in Vanquéa.

Aundré urged his nervous horse down the steep flint slope and into the whispering cornstalks. Not to be left behind when his curiosity was a dagger in his mind, the Vanquéan spurred his own maroon, horned mount down off the road and followed the silent, black-clothed man into the eternally moving, whispering sea.

As he rode deeper, the sounds seemed to form words, invoking pictures of the past day in his memory.

—Vandersaan's painted and powdered face, sneering: *And you want work, demon, you say?*

—A black-bearded face revealed in a flash of magical light: *Uryell? No, by the Internection—you're a Vanquéan!*

—His own voice, thickly accented: *Garban Quénéed is the closest the Lativic tongue can get to my name. I arrived in Aysan nine months ago: at Marchai, in Karlmain.*

—Phrases from Aundré: *No Vanquéan came to Aysan until Maylaert IX's reign . . . I can normally tell where I am—but the when can be a little more difficult . . .*

Day Of The Dark Men

Garban shook his head, scattering the nightmarish sequence. Vanquéans were a practical race, despite being born of a surreal land—even their religions held less mystery than most. The unexplained was never welcome.

But there was certainly something weird in the air. Garban could feel it, as could Aundrém's mare: she whinnied and shied constantly—eager to turn and leave the green forest. The Vanquéan horse, however, from birth subjected to the peculiar world of the second continent, accepted events calmly—though his nostrils flared at the scent of something unknown.

Aundrém himself was silent—checking his horse's wayward lurches with practised tugs on the reins or a quick dig with spurs—but never once spoke, not even reassuring whispers. Garban had the feeling that the dark man knew what caused the coruscating light—or was almost certain—but would not say until they had arrived at the scene. The Vanquéan guessed that, despite the other's usual cool and sardonic manner, there was something happening that Aundrém could have no control over—something that made the man in black afraid.

For the first time, Garban wished he were free of his strange companion—or had never met him. But his curiosity would not let him go now—not until an answer to Aundrém Dariéesan was found.

They emerged into an area where the maize was roughly trampled and shredded—and the dancing light hung over them blindingly. It cast a moving illumination on them, making everything leap and dance. Garban could not see clearly with the dazzling borealis writhing across the sky in soundless agony, not even through shielded eyes, for his colourless pupils were less adaptable to extremes of light than most. But he heard Aundrém's gasp of wonder—and the utter silence all around them was crushing in its totality.

"That's it!" cried the other suddenly, and Garban squinted at the spot he indicated, shading his eyes as well as he could. A huge and alien form lay crushed and obviously dead amidst the pulped ruins of maize stalks. Oily sap glistened on the strange iridescent hide, and papery leaves stuck to it like grotesque parodies of feathers—further emphasising the thing's odd nature.

They urged their horses forward—but even Garban's horned mount refused to go any closer to the dead form. Instead they dismounted, Aundrém's black rapier and Garban's blood red sword drawn. They advanced on the corpse; fearing less the body than whatever could have killed so huge and powerful a creature.

It was almost the height of Garban, and broad. Its skin seemed scaley and, although losing its lustre in death, strongly suggestive of the tortured rainbow that writhed over it. It had four upper limbs that could not accurately be described as arms, and two powerful legs that looked reptilian. Its hammer-shaped head seemed to have no mouth; and two blind, faceted eyes flashed like huge rubies at either side. The Vanquéan stared at the dead creature in morbid fascination: somehow, it felt chillingly familiar.

"Qromme," said Aundrém somberly.

"What?" said Garban, startled by the sudden voice after so much quiet.

"Qromme: one of the two sorcerers who quarrelled with those who became the Seven Wizards of Trolsaus—rulers of that tiny island kingdom."

The Vanquéan stared at the inhuman thing incredulously. "*That* was a sorcerer?" he whispered.

"Once he was as human in shape as you or I—but gradually his nature moulded his appearance." Aundrém walked closer and tapped the scaley thing with the tip of his boot. "Qésaqoch would not be unlike him, I imagine. And what of the Seven

Day Of The Dark Men

themselves, I wonder? How human are they after all these centuries . . .?" His voice trailed off into silent speculation. Garban looked at him curiously.

"Yet if this was equal to the notorious Seven of Trolsaus—what could have killed it?"

The other rubbed his beard thoughtfully. "They thought themselves immortal: Gréna'r, Aryoq, Qromme, Shéttân, Auryân, Qésaqoch, Tsanienn, Thullê and J'mtâg'r. And so they were, to all practical purposes. Not gods, perhaps—but much more than men." His fists clenched spasmodically. "Something that holds no regard for even the gods did this!"

He bent over the thing's neck—or where the neck would have been—and he hissed angrily. Garban peered over his shoulder and saw the thick, squat neck had been thoroughly crushed. The rest of the body also bore signs of terrible mangling.

"As I thought: the shells around the Internection have been broken," Aundrém was saying. He stood up, his peat-black eyes sombre. "It has to be. And Qromme and Qésaqoch somehow made it happen! The colossal *idiots*!"

He turned to glare at Garban, his expression pleading an understanding the Vanquéan was unable to give.

"They've disturbed whatever lies beyond this cosy nest of worlds—and something has come through to be rid of the irritation!" He laughed queerly—his voice strained and harsh.

"Aundrém," asked Garban softly, fearing the answer, "what has happened here?"

"The Dark Man!" replied the other. His black eyes burned into the Vanquéan's with a feverish intensity. "Or Fatecaster—he has a million names. But the childish meddling of Qromme and Qésaqoch have finally brought him to the Internection. The reach of the Dark Gods has been lengthened!"

Aundré m halted the tirade abruptly, and he took a deep, shuddering breath before continuing.

"I'm sorry, friend Garban—but if you only appreciate what this means! It's the end of something far older than the decaying Empire—older even than Vanquéa. The world *must* change now—it has no other choice."

"And this Fatecaster—or Dark Man—or whatever his name is?"

The man in black pointed at the crushed neck and rent scales.

"That," he said with a certain degree of his old sardonicism, "is the work of the hand named Fatecaster. *Now* do you understand my fears?"

Garban gazed long at the wounds, and considered the strength that must have been needed to tear and crush Qromme's huge body. He found himself nodding.

"I can understand a little, Aundré m Dariéesan!"

His blood-red sword snaked up at blinding speed and snatched Aundré m's ebony rapier from his hand—catching the blade between its twin points. Before the other could react to the sudden action, Garban held his sword's tips at Aundré m's throat, pale face grim and uncompromising.

"What the hell!" Aundré m managed to gasp out.

"You have set me to thinking this past day," said the Vanquéan. "I couldn't make up my mind whether you were mad or not; but things said have pricked my interest. And now I want answers."

Aundré m did not answer for a while, he just stared bemused at the other.

"Might I ask what prompted this?" he asked finally.

"You called me Uryell when you first glimpsed me in Vandersaan's cell," began Garban. "I recalled the name later—from an ancient legend of how the Kthalniir were driven from Aysan by the silver-handed Uryell: a hero

Day Of The Dark Men

with dark green eyes and pale red hair. Not unlike my own first appearance in the shadows, I'll wager." He stared challengingly at Aundré, but his expression remained unreadable.

"Secondly, amongst the smoky haunts in Lativ there's a common tale about a man who will come when the Empire ends—a man with a sword, yet he can neither kill nor die; with Fate in his right hand. He's usually referred to as Fatecaster. The old fools who tell the tale for a drink show much the fear as yourself." Garban broke off there, and looked again at the crushed corpse of the inhuman sorcerer.

Aundré sighed. "Well—what do you want answered?"

"This Internection you mention so glibly: what is it? And from where comes your peculiar knowledge of the past and future of the Empire?"

His face lit weirdly by the aurora flickering over them, Aundré sighed again, and smiled crookedly.

"Other places—dimensions, universes, call them what you will—all crowding upon each other; passing through and around, circling in an eternal chaos. That's the Internection, my friend: dimensions so like this as to be identical; or as different as heaven and hell. A mass of sprawling bubbles—like cuckoo-spit!"

"And you?" the Vanquéan pointed at him with his crimson blade. "You can travel through this . . . cuckoo-spit?" It was more a reaffirmation than question. Aundré nodded, his eyes reflecting admiration for the other's ready grasp.

"More or less," he admitted. "Though it seems a trifle difficult at present. I imagine we have our dead friend here to thank for that—in part." The moment of tension past, Aundré's voice had once again assumed its ironic tone. Garban let it pass.

"And there are others with this . . . talent?"

The other did not answer at first. "You're taking this all very calmly," he observed instead.

"You forget—I'm Vanquéan: from a land the rest of the world considers an insane hell. I've heard similar theories before—though not in such detail. Please continue."

Aundré m nodded again. "There are others, true. Some willing; others unwilling or unknowing."

"And beyond this Internection?"

The other's face lost some of its calm levity. "Ah," he replied softly. "For that knowledge I would sacrifice all I've learned from the countless worlds I've seen." He looked directly into Garban's crimson eyes.

"Beyond the Internection I cannot go. It seems the universes within it are a unit: complete, cut off for some reason from whatever lies beyond. Only the greater gods know what is in that void—and their secrets they keep jealously."

"And now something has come in from beyond your Internection," said Garban, once more glancing at Qromme's body.

"Someone, certainly. From out of the void." He smiled at some private joke. "Qésaqoch must be somewhere near, friend Garban—these two would hardly be long parted. Do you feel up to learning more today?"

The Vanquéan's swordpoints dropped, and he grinned boyishly. "I'm always willing to learn more, Aundré m Dariéesan—or whoever you are. But where do we start?"

As though in answer, the flickering display chose that moment to blaze with a sudden flash that assaulted their brains almost like a deafening howl. Then it streaked off across the fields towards the north-west. As it passed, the cornstalks below shrivelled and wilted—leaving a blasted trail wide enough for a platoon of infantry.

"Qromme dies!" cried Aundré m. "His essence will try

Day Of The Dark Men

to reach and unite with Qésaqoch before it's too spent. Our way is clear!"

He ran to retrieve his rapier and then to his nervously-prancing mare. He vaulted into the saddle and impatiently motioned Garban to follow. Waiting no longer, he urged his horse into a gallop—giving vent to all her nervous energy. Garban was in his saddle and following closely within seconds.

They gave their mounts their head, and sped through the destroyed maize, following the weird lights as though they were some infallible guide. The thin cloud overhead faded, and a strong southern winter's sun lit up the pale green sea to their sides—highlighting thunderous purple clouds rising over the northern horizon. Compared to the sun-lit ground, the brooding clouds seemed all the more inky and threatening.

After a seemingly timeless gallop—there being no way to judge distance over the flat, unchanging fields—a low range of hills grew slowly before them. The life-essence of Qromme was obviously headed there.

The fields of loam gave gradual way to shallow, pebbly slopes. Suddenly they were out of the maize and climbing a concave slope into the tiny hills. They were small affairs, hardly worthy of the title hills and certainly unmarked on any map of South Lativ. Covered in tough wiry grass, they were streaked with the bare trunks of deciduous trees and the occasional conifer. In summer they must have been a welcome sight: mounds of deep rich green rising out of pastel ocean.

The scintillating light vanished so abruptly that both Aundré and Garban reined in to blink in surprise at the spot on the slope where it had disappeared. Then the Vanquéan laughed.

"It's a cave, or tunnel through! Look!"

They urged their mounts forward eagerly, quickly reaching the spot. Hidden from below by precarious rocky outcrops,

a black hole gaped in the hillside; just high enough for a riderless horse to squeeze through. They dismounted and stared into the meaningless darkness a while before speaking. An indefinable odour wafted faintly up to them.

"Well?" asked Aundrém finally, looking at Garban. "Do we continue?"

"Why not?" the Vanquéan replied carelessly. "After coming this far?"

Taking their horses' reins, they stepped towards the hole's mouth—but both animals baulked, refusing mutely to step any nearer to the cave. The two men looked at each other a moment, then at their frightened horses. Aundrém shrugged.

"Alone then," he said.

They led the animals away from the cave until their nervousness had abated, and then looped the reins over the jagged bald branches of a stunted hawthorn. As Aundrém took his pistol from its saddle holster and tucked it into his belt, Garban dropped his sword's sheath across his back and tucked a helm under his left arm. Fashioned into the likeness of an eagle's head, the armourer had taken the original shape and turned it into a work of art: flowing curves ran from the beak; the eyeslits almost hidden below heavy, ornate brows. Although aggressively flamboyant, the helm's alien baroquequeness could never be likened to the decadent, overindulgent styles of modern Aysan.

With never a backward glance, they strode into the darkness.

They had gone only a few metres when the rocky floor dropped steeply. Garban almost fell; saved as Aundrém grabbed his shoulder as he stumbled. Stones, dislodged by his fall, slid and rattled their way into silent infinity—not halting before the sounds of their passage faded into the distance.

Day Of The Dark Men

"Perhaps this isn't such a good idea," muttered the Vanquéan as he got to his feet, miraculously still clutching his helm. "Once we start down there all the light'll be gone. We need a torch."

Aundré m chuckled softly. "Have you forgotten the torches in our cell?" he asked. There was a spark, and then he was holding two dancing columns of flame. He handed one to Garban with a wink. The Vanquéan took it gingerly, wary of such careless magic.

They started down the slope once more. After just a few steps they were plunged into absolute darkness. Only the flickering light from the torches illuminated their way—and that not nearly enough for Garban. Every step he took was a nightmare—certain that he would plunge into an unseen abyss each time. Eventually, he halted.

"You'll have to take the lead," he said, waving his torch at the darkness before them. "I can't trust this light."

Aundré m stepped past him wordlessly and resumed the descent. Garban fell in behind him.

The Vanquéan began to wonder where they were heading. At first he had assumed the opening merely a deep cave, or a direct passage through the hill—but they were descending constantly, probably below the level of the maize fields by now. He grew increasingly anxious, and his imagination began to populate the shifting darkness beyond the torches' reach with endless hideous things. The weird moving shapes caused by shadow did little to appease his imaginings. Then one of the shadows scuttled *into* the light on several legs, and was as quickly gone.

The Vanquéan donned his helm, transferred torch to left hand and drew his long sword without thinking—all in a practised moment of action. Aundré m halted and turned, attracted by the noise—and whatever Garban had seen shot through the pools of light again as it rushed down the slope.

"What is it?" asked the man in black.

"I was hoping you could tell me," replied Garban, his voice muffled in the eagle helm. "I saw something."

He expected the other to laugh at his nervousness, but instead Aundrém looked thoughtful. "What did it look like?"

Garban shrugged. "I couldn't see it properly; but it was large, many-legged . . ."

"Like the Vanquéan *vyhn'pna*?"

He thought a moment, wondering at Aundrém's question. "Similar, perhaps. But the *vyhn'pna* lives in shallow desert hollows, not deep underground."

"I said *like* it," Aundrém murmured, moving his torch to survey the walls. After a brief search he faced back down the slope and began to walk cautiously onwards once more.

After what seemed like an endless drop through darkness, the floor began to level off; and a pale, cold glow from the end of the tunnel lit the walls with frosty highlights. Their torches guttered, died, and were gone at a gesture from Aundrém. More cautiously than ever, they stepped towards whatever caused the light, the man in black drawing his ebony rapier.

The tunnel disgorged them into a huge cavern, so tall the roof and walls were lost in blackness. A subterranean city sat in the rocky grasp, eerie witch-lights hanging from its nitred walls and nestling in rubble corners—bathing the ruin in the cold, blue-white glow they had seen. They stepped forward, lost in wonder at the sight.

It was incredibly old—that much was plain—for the narrow streets were paved with the crumbled stone and mortar from tall, erratic buildings that leaned drunkenly over them. Almost fossilized wooden shutters hung from rusty hinges. Wide and deep trenches ran around and through the tortured city, and once gorgeous bridges collapsed into them testified that originally the city had sat on a river or network of canals, and had eventually sunk—only to be encysted in rock. In fact, the

Day Of The Dark Men

entire cavern—what they could see of it—looked as though it had once been below the sea: clumps of dead coral and crushed shells littered the smooth floor, and what appeared to be the skeletons of fish were embedded in the walls.

Both men scrambled down the rubble into the depths of one dry canal and wandered along it until they could climb out into a narrow, winding alley of a street. Cautiously, they began to pace along it.

The alley was short and steep-sided. At its end they chose a right-hand turn onto another street rather than the dead canal they spotted further on. Thus began a journey through twisting, dimly-lit streets where the Vanquéan's poor eyes constantly threatened to betray him, and horrible things scuttled away from under their feet. After several minutes of wandering through the shadowy maze, Aundréu suddenly spoke.

"Garban, I think I know where we are!"

"In an ancient city metres below the South Lativic countryside?" suggested the Vanquéan dryly.

"No, no! The name of this city! This must be Vanitsea—the city that sank below a sea eons before the Laneenovitch Empire came into being!"

Garban halted, thinking. "I recall the name. But I always thought it a legend—like most lands supposedly under the sea."

"Just proves how wrong you can be. After all, most people thought Vanquéa a myth until a few years ago."

"True. But still—where's the sea now?" They started walking once again.

"Drained away somewhere," said Aundréu. "Half of South Lativ was once supposed to have been below the waves. Whilst the Aysan continent stretched much further to the west than Karlmain and Blendeim."

"More myths, Aundréu?"

The man in black shrugged good-naturedly and kicked at a lump of pale masonry.

The streets began to widen, and for that Garban was thankful. At least now the shadowy areas didn't crowd so closely. To the Vanquéan, Vanîtsea was not an ancient city locked hopelessly below ground, but a sinister tomb dwelling in a benighted cavern; the mouldering home of those earthly horrors that could not stand the light of normal day.

Aundrém's shout was timely. Garban looked up to see a horde of things dropping down one of the listing walls towards them. Like the creature in the tunnel, they were neither octopus or spider—yet reminiscent of both. They squirmed to the ground on chintinous tentacles and charged the men.

Horried paralysis gave way to fighting madness quickly. Rapier and twin-pointed sword flashed in the half-light as they sliced through the unnatural flesh of the creatures. Like the spiders they resembled, the things spat tough silken threads at the two—trying to entangle them. But the agility of many years' practise helped both men dodge the strands, and the blood-red and ebony blades sheared through the sticky threads easily.

Aundrém and Garban stood back to back—facing the onrushing things with fear turned to blind fury. The very hideousness of the creatures fuelled the men's loathing, their urge to destroy. In a short time, dissected corpses filled the street from wall to wall, and the surviving things backed away, wriggling up the houses' sides and into the darkness.

Garban pulled off his helm and wiped his pale brow with a shaking hand. He scraped off some of the foul-smelling ichor coating his sword onto one of the bloated abdomens at his feet.

"Gods above and below," he muttered, his voice trembling with reaction. "Is this some hell?" He tucked his avian helm under his arm.

Day Of The Dark Men

Aundrém shook his rapier free of blood and drew his pistol from his belt, checking its priming. "Perhaps. At least, I suspect we'll find more than one tormented soul before long."

Saying no more, he continued down the street, stepping carefully over the oozing carcasses. The Vanquéan wondered if the other consciously knew where he was going—or if he was drawn by some unknown sense. He refrained from asking.

They moved through the benighted streets, turning left and right seemingly at random. They crossed a small, white bridge—and saw below a solid glistening mass of serpentine writhing where once had been water. And then they emerged from a narrow alley into a wide, lighted plaza. To their right marched colonnades—boxing in a small square—and a tall, red-bricked tower that disappeared into the unlit gloom, towards the unseen roof. On their left was a magnificent palace, roofed with gilded domes and surrounded with brick arches that still held the faintest traces of paint. Beyond the plaza stretched impenetrable blackness, suggestive of a midnight sea; and almost on the very edge of that void stood a tall, fluted pillar. Something stood atop that pillar—a winged lion, Garban thought, until it moved.

"Hold there!" boomed an inhuman voice. "Two men I see—and one in black. Hold there!"

The creature raised what looked like an old musket in two forelimbs and aimed it down at them. With a heart-wrenching jolt, Garban recognised its similarity to the dead Qromme—except this one's faceted eyes blazed a deep blue, and it had four saurian legs and two arms—if such terms could be applied to them. Peculiar wings sprouted from its scintillating back, and a faint, pearly glow seemed to hover around it.

"Qésaqoch?" he asked in a low, awed voice.

Aundrém nodded. "But a poor thing to what he was, with little of his powers left."

The creature waved its long musket. "I hear thy speech, black one!" The booming voice, coming from a fearful mouth, still trembled with either fear or madness. "Tell me thy nature!"

"I'm not he," replied Aundrém. He raised his right hand, and then his black rapier in the other. Qésaqoch seemed to peer intently at him from his lofty refuge.

"Ah—thou art not the man." His azure eyes burned into Garban. "And thou—thou hast the look of one of mine. Have my dear brothers sent thee, then?"

The Vanquéan turned helplessly to Aundrém. "What does he mean?"

The man in black sighed heavily and fixed his eyes on the slabs at his feet. "Before Qromme and Qésaqoch split from the Seven, they ruled a land to the west where all nine played at gods. Eventually they grew too ambitious, and created men."

Garban's stomach did a slow turn.

"Those men eventually overthrew them, and they quarrelled," the other continued. "The Seven fled to Helgälind; and the other two obviously came here."

"You mean Vanquéa, of course," said Garban carefully, his mouth numb with the taste of revelation.

"You said yourself how similar the creatures here are to your own," said Aundrém gently. "These sorcerers may be almost immortal—but they lack imagination."

The Vanquéan's pale face spun towards the creature cowering atop his pillar. He pointed his crimson blade.

"*That* created Vanquéa!" he shouted in horrified fury. "That miserable, insane . . . *monster!*" He began to tremble uncontrollably; his helm dropped to the slabs with an echoing clatter.

"Silence, creature!" screamed Qésaqoch. "Bow thy knee to thy god!"

Day Of The Dark Men

Garban howled something in Vanquéan and snatched Aundré's pistol. He fired and, inexperienced shot though he was, the bullet smashed home in Qésaqoch's right shoulder. The sorcerer let out a deafening bellow, and his musket dropped from his inhuman grasp. After an eternal fall, it finally crashed to the paved square, the gunpowder exploding harmlessly in a vivid red flash.

"Hell this surely is!" cried Garban over the screaming voice of Qésaqoch and the endlessly echoing detonation.

"Hell indeed," came a soft voice to his left that was still audible above the bedlam. Garban and Aundré turned swiftly, their swords rising to meet the new threat.

A tall, gaunt man stepped from the shadowed arches under the palace. He was clothed all in black, his shirt a strange spun material, his boots tall. A heavy cloak draped his wiry frame and his left, gloved hand peeked through the folds, resting on the hilt of a heavy sword. His green eyes were at once enigmatic and pools of deep misery. In several strides he had crossed the plaza and joined them.

Aundré's lips twisted sardonically. He dropped the point of his rapier. "I was right," he said.

The stranger's gaunt face turned to his, and a pained look passed fleetingly through his eyes. "I know you, Raven," he said in a deep calm voice. "Though perhaps I shouldn't . . ."

"And I you, Voidal," replied Aundré.

"Voidal!" howled Qésaqoch, his wound forgotten. "'Tis he! This is the man! *Destroy him!*"

The gaunt man looked up at the trembling sorcerer, and puzzlement crept into his eyes. He rubbed at his forehead as though it ached.

"You seem to know me too, but I don't recall . . . Ah—the dreams!" he groaned softly. He fell silent again, and the only sound was the soft sobbing of Garban as he sank to his knees on the plaza.

"It was that cursed golden sword!" cried Qésaqoch abruptly. He clutched at his wound and looked desperately about as though he could escape his self-inflicted prison. "We thought we could use it to escape the Internection! We took it to the outer boundaries and hurled it at the interface."

Aundrénn nodded somberly. "And ruptured it briefly." His eyes flickered to the Voidal and back. "You know well enough not to meddle with one of the Swords of Fate, especially Cerastes. And where is it now, *The Serpent*?"

"Gone!" groaned the sorcerer. "There was a vast disruption—and we were hurled wildly through the planes before falling back to Vanîtsea. The . . . sword hath gone . . ."

"Yes," murmured the Voidal. "I seem to recall a dream . . . or a dream of a dream. A great golden sword of terrible power, stolen . . . used for awful bargains and threats . . . now wielded by an imbecile. Soon to destroy an Empire in the hands of . . ." He groaned again. "No, it fades . . ."

"Back!" screamed Qésaqoch, reminded of the Dark Man's presence. "Thou dost not belong here, Voidal! Begone—lest I destroy thee!"

"Begone? To where?" enquired the gaunt man. His tone was genuinely puzzled. "I have no intention of harming you."

The inhuman sorcerer laughed insanely. Garban raised tear-filled eyes to glower with hatred at the creature—and he thought he saw another of the octupoid creatures scuttle around the fluted column. But it vanished quickly, and he could not trust his blurred vision.

"Not hurt me, aye!" laughed Qésaqoch. "But Qromme lies dead—and thou art he that killed him!"

The Voidal shook his head, as though to clear it; but then he stiffened, and awful realization flooded his pained eyes. He pulled his right arm from below his cloak—and stared in anguish at the handless wrist.

Day Of The Dark Men

"Ah, no," he whispered.

There was a sudden whoop behind them, and all three turned to see a band of men charging into the plaza from several streets. They were a mixture of soldier and peasant, armed with swords and spears—but all had the look of the dead about them. Qésaqoch's soulless servants, come to kill his enemies.

For a moment, Garban stared uncomprehendingly at them, but then a dull fury swept over him. He sprang to his feet with a horrible Vanquéan war-cry, ran at the attackers, his red sword spinning in the air.

Both Aundré and Garban fought with all their skill—the Vanquéan possessed with a murderous hatred for anything of Qésaqoch's—but they could not beat this foe. Soulless, controlled by the wizard, they could not die. The most terrible wound healed in seconds. Gradually, the man in black and the Vanquéan were being worn down.

The Voidal stood alone, watching the battle with a calm indifference. For some reason, none of Qésaqoch's servants would come near the Dark Man.

Garban wearily parried a spear thrust and hacked through the wielder's neck. As he kicked another in the chest, he heard Qésaqoch's inhuman voice rise in a terrible shriek. Risking a glance, he saw the sorcerer grappling hopelessly with some multi-legged thing that was trying to wrap itself around him. Then he had to look away as a sword flashed by his eyes.

Something smashed into the small of his back, driving all the wind out of him for a moment. He lurched forward, felt his blade snatched from his weakened grasp—then he was down, being trampled by a score of feet.

There was a despairing shriek, and suddenly each of the attackers crumpled at the knees and fell like rag dolls. Rolling onto his front, Garban looked up in time to see Qésaqoch,

wrapped by the crushing shape, stumble off the edge of the pillar and plummet dead to the ground.

Garban struggled painfully to his feet, picking up his fallen sword, and limped towards the body. Aundrém reached it first, standing over the crushed and torn thing as a scintillating cloud of pulsing light hung over it. There was no sign of the thing that had killed him.

For a second, Garban just looked down at the body, remembering his feelings when he had first seen Qromme. Then, his pale face twisting, he brought his sword shearing down and hacked through the vestigial neck. With a mournful rush, the light streaked upwards and was lost in the cavern's depths.

The Vanquéan turned away from the dead Qésaqoch, suddenly nauseated. The Voidal stood before him, and Garban noted, with a thrill of horror he could not explain, that the gaunt man's right hand was once more on its wrist. The Voidal's sad green eyes gazed wistfully at the body, and he handed over the eagle helm.

"The Dark Gods are envious and quick to destroy," he muttered.

Aundrém came up behind Garban, and laid a hand on his shoulder. "Not always," he said, looking at the Voidal with pity.

Garban shuddered. "Let's leave this foul pit!" he snapped. He began to cross the plaza towards the alley where he and Aundrém had arrived. He paused a moment, and turned to look at the two men in black.

"Aundrém?" he said.

The other looked at the Voidal instead. "And what of you?" he asked.

The Dark Man rubbed at his forehead with his right hand—and then stared at it in fear and disgust. "I don't know . . ." he murmured.

Day Of The Dark Men

"Perhaps we had best stay together," said Aundré. "Together we might find a way back through the disturbances."

The Voidal gave him a penetrating stare. "Very well, Raven," he said at length. "Well met in hell."

Aundré laughed humourlessly. He turned to face Garban.

"It's been a pleasure to know you, friend Garban," he said, voice genuinely warm. "Try to forget, eh?"

Garban bowed. "Farewell, Aundré Dariéesan; Voidal. One day I may be able to forget. Until then . . ." He turned abruptly, his face anguished, and strode relentlessly away. Both men in black watched him for a while, and then they disappeared into the darkness under the palace.

Darrell Schweitzer

THE SORCERER TO HIS LONG-LOST LOVE

Come to me by moonlight,
when the wind is in the trees,
and follow me in silence yet
and linger among these
fallen idols of lost gods
and fanes where wild thorns grow,
where once we walked and once we paused
a thousand years ago.

Now I conjure you amid
this city of the dead:
Rise from your grave by moonlight
before the night has fled,
and for an instant resurrect
the love we used to know,
when we two dwelt among these stones
a thousand years ago.

William F. Nolan

GOBBLE, GOBBLE!

William F. Nolan is a regular contributor to Fantasy Tales. We've mentioned before the prodigious output of this Californian novelist, scriptwriter and anthologist, weighing in at over fifty books and more than six hundred short stories and articles. This year expect to see his novel Helltracks and his latest collection of horror fiction, Nightshapes, both from Avon Books. Already published in 1991 is Blood Sky, a booklet from Deadline Publishing with fifty of the author's illustrations. And in Autumn there will be an anthology (co-edited with Martin H. Greenberg) entitled October's Friend, celebrating Ray Bradbury's 50th year as a professional storyteller. Bill's famous Logan's Run trilogy will be republished over this year and next by Dell in their "SF Classics" trade paperback series. In the short story department, ten tales are due in various anthologies and magazines, including a novella in a special Nolan issue of Weird Tales. Finally, the author's bi-monthly horror comic magazine, William F. Nolan's Beyond Midnight, will be launched by Malibu Graphics in October.



Which is when I went for him. Like that shark went for the swimmer at the beginning of Jaws. (Art: Tony Todd)

Right now I'm a young, healthy female human being. I haven't always been human (didn't start that way) and I probably won't stay human for too much longer, but I'm having fun these days so I'll stick with it for awhile. Not that I'm from outer space or anything, but in human terms I'm an alien organism.

What I am is a feeder.

I don't feed very often—maybe once every six months or so—but when I do get hungry it takes a lot to satisfy me. But that's cool. I can always find things to eat.

And each time I feed, I change. But I'll get to that. Guess my changing can seem kind of icky, kind of a grossout, but it's really cool. Hey, I *know* I use the word cool too much, okay? But so do all of my friends.

If I sound like a dippy high school chick writing in her school notebook or something, well, that's what I am right now. That's the latest me. Sixteen and pretty. I mean, not an absolute knockout, not like some cheerleaders I know with super boobs and real cute butts, but pretty enough to make the guys go for me. Sharp looking. And I dress sharp. Plenty of boys ask me out. To dances and parties and stuff. (And to a lot of dumb movies!).

Of course, I don't eat what my friends do: gooky burgers with fries (heavy on the ketchup), doughnuts and candy and junk like that. Most of my girlfriends scarf down Big Macs and pizza like mad, and a lot of them drink beer. That's sicko stuff as far as I'm concerned. Sure, I can *fake* eating junk like that (and I have to) but there's no real food value in any of it. I go for basics.

My pattern as a feeder has been pretty consistent. I select a town, and a species, move in, live with them for six months or so, do my feeding (yum, yum) and then move on to another place. (I really dig France. Had me some good eating in Paris, you bet!)

I've been a bird and an insect (beetle) and a dog and an ant (African) and once I was a male housecat named Ari. Since I was "fixed" (you know, like no balls!) I didn't go around chasing females. I was real skinny, with all the little knobs on my backbone sticking out. Vet said I was hyper-thyroid and I had to swallow pills with my catfood. Real drag.

You're mixed up, right? About my feeding. Look, I didn't say I never ate "normal" food when I go between feedings; it's just that I don't *like* it and have to fake liking it.

After a few months I start to get bored, no matter what change I've made. But by the time the boredom really sets in I'm usually like *starved*. So I feed, change, and move on. (Usually eat more than once, when I begin a feeding, but I'll get to that later.)

I guess you figure I'm a creep, huh? Just because I'm different. I'm with my girlfriends at a movie and this guy in a ski mask chops off a nice lady's head with an axe and we go, ugh, that's *gross*. So I guess, to you, I'm in the same bag. A gross old feeder.

Old. That's an interesting word. How old am I? Jeez, who the freak knows? I've been around a long time, that's for sure. Feeders just keep going. We don't age like you do because we keep adapting and we're never the same long enough to get old. So I don't really have any idea of how old I am. Or care, for that matter.

Right now (existential time), as Judy Ann Singer, I'm sixteen. And I live in Lawton City, Illinois. In a green, quiet little town of three thousand. And I go to Lawton High where I'm president of the Drama Club (I'm good at acting roles, been doing it all my life).

Being female again is a blast (as my pals say). Last three times I fed I was a male and I like being female better. Everything is *softer*, somehow. It's a silky feeling, being female. Males have hard edges; they live in a rougher

Gobble, Gobble!

world. But I'd freak out, having to stay one or the other. We feeders have a choice.

Well, guess I've done enough rambling. Since this is what I call an alien record then I'd better start recording, eh? Instead of just blah, blah, blah on paper. Get down the important stuff. The nitti gritti.

Okay, then. I'll start by telling you about Rick. He's my latest boyfriend. Been going steady with him for just over three months. Do we *do* it? Sure. He's cool. Safe sex, right? Anyhow . . .

Rick's on the football team. Not captain yet, but he will be next year. And he also plays basketball and baseball. All-round jock. I go to a *lot* of games, take my word!

Football is fun, with all the guys bashing away at each other. Blood sport. Basketball's okay, too, but baseball's a drag. The pits. Boring.

One of our fun things to do is go to the drive-in on Fridays in Rick's Mustang convertible. We put the top up (for privacy) and just make out like crazy for most of the dumb movie. Unless it's a Clint Eastwood. When he's Dirty Harry. I always have Rick cool down when ole Clint's doing his thing. And he doesn't mind, really. He digs Clint. That's when we actually *watch* the movie.

So it's Friday night and Rick asks me to go to the drive-in with him to a horror flick called *The Bloodsuckers*, about a bunch of vampires on Fifth Avenue in New York who suck blood out of rich people who live in million-dollar townhouses or condos or whatever.

I like horror flicks because I can do a lot of screaming and Rick thinks it's neat, my screaming and grabbing at him. Actually, vampires don't scare me. First of all, they don't exist and if they did they'd be real easy to fight off with garlic and crosses (two crossed tablespoons will do) and holy water and all like that. But I *do* like to

watch the stakes get hammered into their chests (spurt, spurt!). That's neat.

So off we go to the Big Clock Drive-In to see this new bloodsucker movie, and right away Rick gets real attentive. You know, he's hot to trot. We haven't made it in about two weeks and he's all steamed up about the idea of being with me in my tight black-leather outfit. Boots and the whole bit. Rick's a freak for black leather. Wears it himself when he rides his Honda. (Yeah, he's a biker, too. Macho man!)

They know us at the Big Clock. We go there a lot (no other drive-ins in Lawton) and the ticket guys know us and when they see me in some of my sexy outfits they kind of drool, you know. ("Way to go, Ricko! Way to go.")

Rick keeps the Mustang real cherry. Wax job every Sunday. It's a classic, and he treats it like one. Like he treats me. (Thinks he knows me. Oh, wow, does he ever *not* know me!)

It's dark now and we've got the top up and the black metal speaker's inside so we can hear the sound track, and we're eating popcorn. (Well, *he* is; I'm faking.)

Then Rick goes, "Today my parents told me they want me to go to UCLA in California for college. Whatd'ya think?"

And I go, "It's a neat school. And I hear that L.A. is neat, too."

"My ole man went to UCLA so he wants me to go there." Rick leans in close. "Will you go with me?"

"In a year? You kidding? I never plan ahead that far."

"Hey, I don't want to go unless you do."

"Maybe I'll go to California. Who knows?" I giggle. "Quit being so serious. We're here to see some vampires, right?"

And he goes, "Right," and gives me a squeeze as the screen noise starts and the previews come on.

It's really dark now, the kind of deep dark you get in an Illinois summer, and pretty soon the chief bloodsucker is sinking his fangs into the throat of some blonde rich

Gobble, Gobble!

bitch who owns a lot of Texas oil and wears a ton of diamonds around the house.

That's when I realize I haven't fed in over six months, when this ham actor is scarfing away at the blonde's neck.

Hungry. It always hits me sudden like this. I never plan a feeding, it just happens. Like pow! One second I'm doing my act, as a human or whatever, and the next I'm like into my feeding mode.

When the time comes to feed, look out world! The hunger just *consumes* me, like a wave washing over a shore. And right then, watching the rich blonde getting fanged by this chief vampire . . . I . . . am . . . suddenly . . . *starved!*

Rick goes, "You look funny, Jude."

And I go, "Yeah? Funny how?"

"Your eyes. And the way you're looking at me. Kind of super intense. What's with you?"

"It's time to eat is all. I'm hungry. Gobble, gobble!"

"Eat? We ate before we came here, remember? At the break I'll get some chilli dogs an' cokes, like always. How come all of a sudden you're hungry?"

"It's been almost six and a half months," I tell him.

He goes, "Huh?" Real surprised at what I just said.

Which is when I went for him. Like that shark went for the swimmer at the beginning of *Jaws*.

I've got a lot of interior strength. All feeders do. We can summon it up when we need it. Like now. And my teeth are sharp.

But this is for the record, so I don't want to mix you up about what happened to Rick.

I'm Rick now. I mean, after we left the drive-in I was behind the wheel of the Mustang and Judy Ann Singer was inside me, all part of the change, okay?

Let me try and explain. I don't feed like you'd think I would. I don't just go around gobbling up people and things the way

girls at the school do Big Macs. That's not how a feeder operates.

We absorb.

We go inside and eat out the whole center of our victims (if you want to call them that), kind of leaving them hollow but still looking and acting ordinary on the outside.

And we usually go for two or three at once. At least I do. You know, I told you how it takes a lot to satisfy me once I really settle down to feed after maybe half a year. I'm starved, for sure.

So Rick wasn't enough. He was like the first course of the meal. I was still real hungry.

His parents were home, watching TV, when I parked the Mustang outside their house and used Rick's key to get in.

They're in the livingroom, watching a late night movie about some lady doctor who was saving babies in Calcutta.

I go, "Hi!" giving them a smile.

They make me wait for the next commercial before they'll talk to me.

"You're home early, son," goes Rick's father.

And his mother goes, "Yes, where's Judy?"

I shrug. "She's dead."

They go all pale.

"My God!" says Rick's old man, standing up from the couch.

"Did you have an accident?"

"Nope." I walk over and switch off the TV. "No accident. She just isn't around anymore."

"You're not making sense," says Rick's mother.

I smile at her. I walk toward her. I'm strong and I'm fast and I'm *still* very hungry.

"Gobble, gobble!" I say.

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